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MARION AMES TAGGART

THE DOCTOR'S LITTLE GIRL SERIES

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WORKS OF
MARION AMES TAGGART

The Doctor's Little Girl Series

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NANCY PORTER.

The Doctor's Little Girl Series

NANCY PORTER'S OPPORTUNITY

BY

Marion Ames Taggart

Author of "The Doctor's Little Girl," "Sweet Nancy," "Nancy, the Doctor's Little Partner," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY

Harriet O'Brien

BOSTON

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DEDICATED

TO

Alice Fyfe Goodell

WITH LOVE

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NANCY PORTER'S OPPORTUNITY

CHAPTER I

THE SWEETNESS OF SIXTEEN

"WHY should sixteen be sweeter than any other age?" asked Nancy Porter.

She was basking in the warmth of an Indian summer day, its golden sunshine making the piazza of the doctor's house quite as pleasant as it was in June, though only at noon; the tang of chestnut-opening frosts drove everybody in to the hearth fires when the sun dipped downward. However, as it was still only two hours past noon, Nancy and her two intimate comrades, Mimi Hunt and Doris Clark, were revelling in the warmth like lizards.

"Nobody ever said anything to us — to any one — about 'sweet fifteen,' and they'll all drop the word when we turn into seventeen, but now it's: 'Well, how does it feel to be sweet sixteen, Nancy?' Or: 'Here's the doctor's sweet sixteen year old!' Or — things like that, you know. We all hear them. I wonder why sixteen was picked out for the sweet year?" Nancy continued with her low laugh, that was a feminine edition of her father's mellow chuckle. Nancy grew like her father day by day, allowing for her young girlhood and his fifty-six years of life and stalwart manhood.

"It's because it begins with S, — sixteen, I mean," said Mimi, not being given to vain speculation. "Though so does seventeen. I'm sure I don't know; I guess it's because the two S words go so well together, and sixteen came first, before seventeen, to catch the sweet for itself."

"Alliteration, Miss Hunt," Nancy translated Mimi's meaning for her kindly, with a real Doctor Porter twinkle in her gray-blue eyes. "At that rate we should have passed through 'fair fourteen' and 'foolish fifteen.' I don't know what thirteen would have been — "

"Thick thirteen, maybe; mine was," said plump Mimi, with her jolly laugh.

"Don't!" cried Doris. "It makes me crazy to hear a lot of words repeating the same sound. What about sweet sixteen, anyway, Nancy?"

"I don't know; I was just wondering," said Nancy. "I have been wondering how it started ever since last month, when I began to have the title. There is a lot about it, Doris, if it comes to that. It's a nice age, don't you think so? We have better times than we used to, I really believe."

"We weren't particularly miserable when we were children," said Mimi.

"I don't have better times," said Doris Clark, frowning. She was a thin girl, with remarkably straight black hair. Its sleek severity and gloss seemed to spread down over her entire person. She was unyouthfully plain in attire and air, but this was not due to her hair nor to her inclinations, but to the aunt that took a mother's place to Doris; *took* it, but, by no means, filled it. Miss Augusta Clark had an old-fashioned fear of what our Puritan forebears would have called "the natural man." This fear was much accentuated when it came to the natural woman. Miss Clark considered it her duty to "keep down" Doris' vanity and any tendency to light-mindedness which the girl might evince. So Doris went with considerable bitterness

of spirit among the girls who wore trinkets and superfluous pretty things, so dear to sixteen years. Even Doctor Porter and Mrs. Porter's plots to give Doris a girlish girlhood often failed, though they succeeded more often than any one else could, being "much looked up to," as the Chagford phrase is, by Miss Clark, as by everybody else in the three Chagfords.

"Oh, Doris, now come! You have a part in everything Mimi and I do," protested Nancy.

"Aunt Augusta gets worse and worse. She was bad enough when I was ten or so, making me give up dolls and turn into a little old woman before I had got on long dresses — "

"Only to her shoe tops, or to the fourth button now," murmured Nancy, leaning forward, pretending to make herself accurate by refreshing her memory. Nancy did not intend ever to let Doris take her misfortunes seriously.

"But she's worse every year," Doris grumbled on, refusing to smile. "Any one might suppose I was the kind of girl who would run away and join a circus if I had a chance!"

The other two girls shouted. The picture of sober Doris riding bareback in spangled gauze skirts, with her hair in its usual sleek, tight braids,

arose before Nancy's quick imagination and tickled it.

"Well, you might," Doris insisted, not seeing the fun. "I'll have my own money when I'm eighteen, and then if I don't buy clothes! Fancy ones, some in bad taste, just to have 'em. Perfectly gorgeous, the kind you hate — and so do I."

Nancy fell back in her chair and laughed and laughed. "Something like the Coggs girls when they came into that enormous fortune?" she suggested. "You couldn't blossom out tropically if you tried, Dory, dear. But, if you sobered down into such lovable, nice girls, nice-mannered, too, now, as Maizie, Taizie, Daisy and Hazie Coggs are, nobody would grudge you the showy gowns you didn't want! Oh, you ridiculous Doris! Imagine buying gorgeous things that you didn't want in order to get square with yourself for wearing plain things you hadn't wanted while you were growing up!"

"How many girls would you expect Doris to grow into, Nancy?" asked Mimi. "You said if she grew into such nice girls as the Coggs are."

"Just as many as she could," replied Nancy undaunted. "It's too lovely to keep one's thoughts and words running perfectly. Isn't it the dreamiest,

most perfect day! I really believe Indian summer is the best of the whole year!"

"When it isn't May-time, arbutus-time and violet-time, or June and rose-time," said a pleasant voice, a voice that had an alto quality and a thrill that was like a cordial. Nancy was like her father in many ways, the wise, great-hearted lover of men and books, as well she might be, having been his comrade and "assistant" since her birth, but she was like her lovable, sweet, pure mother, too, and one of the best gifts she had from this mother was her soft, low voice.

The girls sprang to their feet, all three of them, to welcome Mrs. Porter now as she stood smiling in the doorway.

"Aren't you glad your daughter isn't consistent, but loves every season best when it is in season, mother o' mine?" demanded Nancy, going over to put an arm around her mother and pull her gently toward the chair which she had just vacated.

Mrs. Porter looked up at her with love in her brown eyes. She had to look up to Nancy now, for in her fifteenth year the slender little creature had suddenly made up her mind to grow and had topped her mother by almost half a head. Nancy was still a slender creature and would always have a look of

delicacy because of the pallor of her ivory-tinted skin, the long dark lashes that swept her cheeks, the distinctly drawn dark brows, the dark, fine smooth hair, and the limpid clearness of her gray-blue eyes with the pupils that were usually dilated, to the increase of those eyes' earnestness and veiled brilliancy. Nancy was not precisely a pretty girl, though her colouring was lovely and her features were fine, especially the sensitive mouth with the upper lip so quick to quiver or to compress. But Nancy came near to being a beautiful girl, her face was so full of varying expression, so pure in its delicate oval, so informed with the beauty of the best knowledge and aspirations which her father and mother had given her day by day.

"I am glad that my daughter loves the riches of the year, yes, but I don't quite see how her father's daughter could do less," returned Mrs. Porter, sinking into Nancy's chair with a sigh of content.

"Indeed she couldn't!" agreed Nancy, perching on the edge of a hammock. "Driving all the time with Doctor Mark Porter, M. D. — now that isn't wrong, Doris! M. D. doesn't mean doctor over again in this case, but My Daddy, as you should know by this time — driving with that blessed, big man teaches any one to see all the beauty in all the

months, if anything could. Motherdy, do you know why they call this St. Martin's summer?"

"Much the prettier name! Because it follows after St. Martin's Day? It's the French name for it, and they mark saints' days," said Mrs. Porter.

"That's what the books tell you — Brewer's Handbook!" Nancy held up her forefinger reproachfully. "You must never give text-book answers, Mildred dear; I always prefer you to answer out of your own dear little head! It is because St. Martin shared his cloak with the beggar, and at this time of year, when we begin to shiver, we get a share of the generous saint's warm cloak. He shares with us a part of his summer."

"That's a better answer, dearie. Tell your father that pretty reason for the kindly season's name. Here comes Richard!" added Mrs. Porter.

A tall boy was coming rapidly up the street, whistling softly to himself, and that he was not an ordinary boy was proved, if it needed proving, by the fact that he was whistling Dvorak's "Humoresque," not the sort of music usually heard on a boy's lips. But this was Richard Lovering, on one side the descendant of the old Lovering family of Chagford and of a gentle Italian family on the other. He was a musician of more than ordinary ability;

his violin playing was the wonder of the Chagfords, Chagford proper, Chagford Falls and North Chagford, as it would have been of larger, more critical places. Rick was also marvellously handsome, his beauty being of the sort that the Greeks loved to carve in marble and which he must have obtained from his Italian ancestors, in spite of his blue, blue eyes and fair hair and skin. He was taller and larger than Nancy, though they were the same age. Since he had found love in Chagford he had developed in the way nature meant him to. No one could have dreamed that he had come to his father's old home poor, friendless, in danger of the bitter fate of depending upon the town charity. For five years Rick had been an inmate of the Porter house, dearly beloved by the Porters, taking a son's place to the doctor and his wife, being like the dearest of brothers to Nancy. Yet, as time went on, and Rick and she were sixteen, there was a growing consciousness between them that Rick was not just the same as a brother to Nancy, though not less dear.

"Hallo, Rick!" called Mimi and Doris together. In their eyes Rick was the greatest of boys, the best, handsomest, most gifted and most lovable.

"Hallo, Do-re-mi!" cried Rick, waving his books at them. He had devised this musical combination

of their names as a united salutation, to their admiration.

"Here I am, dear Mother Porter! Nancy, where's your sewing? Did I bring you up to idle away your youth like this? I met the doctor down the street, Mrs. Porter. He has found a horse to suit him at last and he is bringing him home."

"Oh!" exclaimed Nancy. "Poor Tonic!"

"Yes," assented Rick sadly. "He has arranged to sell Tonic for his hide. I was shocked."

"I am more shocked by your fearful disregard of truth, Richard," said Nancy sternly. "Of course I know it is far better for that blessed old horse to be relieved of his task, and I know he is to be made happy in father's fields till he goes to the Elysian Fields, but it seems as though he would hate to see father and me driving a new horse in his shafts! We three have so long been inseparable."

"You'll drive him still, Nancy, enough to save his feelings and yet spare his muscles," said Rick, seeing that tears were near Nancy's eyes. "A doctor's horse can't always be considered; even our kind doctor has to push his horse sometimes. It's better to give faithful old Tonic an understudy. Here comes the doctor, also the understudy."

Plainly it was not old Tonic bringing his master

home. Tonic had been left in the stable that afternoon and Doctor Porter was coming up the street at a pace which Tonic long ago decided was unseemly.

The same old buggy the doctor used; nobody could persuade him to get another while that one held out — it wouldn't be much longer! In its shafts was the new horse and on its seat sat Doctor Porter, waving his whip by way of salute to his family and Nancy's friends on the piazza. The doctor had passed from grizzled gray hair to being entirely gray, but otherwise he was unchanged. He was at that age when a man as sound in health as the doctor was seems to stand still, so gently does Time rob him of his tribute.

Nancy flew down the steps and down the walk to meet her father. Even when his absence had not been longer than it took to go to the post office, his return was always a reason for rejoicing. Between this father and his only child the affection that existed was one as truly of comradeship as it was filial. "The doctor's little girl," as Chagford called her, "Doctor Porter's Assistant," as the doctor called her, was all in all to her father, whom she worshipped in return.

"Well, Dame Trot, I won't ask how you like him,

because I know you are torn with jealousy for Tonic. But do you think he is no more abominable in Tonic's place than is inevitable?" demanded the doctor, receiving Nancy's kiss and noting that as she gave it she was eying the new member of the family.

"I think he is very good looking," said Nancy slowly. "He has a fine head and his eye is calm and full, and there's not a lump on a single leg! Yes, he's a nice horse, father dearest, if he is as good as he looks."

"You do credit to my training, Nancy! That was an intelligent verdict. All that you should add to it is his depth of chest and strong withers, which means he can pull and endure," said the doctor, well pleased. "I want you to be able to judge a horse. I have always felt it helped to judge a man. The terms are different, but there seems to be a connection. Ah, there's Stephen! Stephen, will he do?"

"That's a good animal, doctor," said Doctor Porter's long-established right-hand man. "He's a lighter chestnut than Tonic, but a chestnut's a chestnut, and I always did say there was no better dispositioned horse goin' on four legs."

"And any other number is hardly worth considering," agreed the doctor. "All right; glad you

approve him. Can you see him there, Mildred, Mimi and Doris?"

Mrs. Porter and the girls accepted the implied invitation and went down to the gate, where they agreed to the unanimous praise of the new horse.

"What is his name, Mark?" asked Mrs. Porter.

"He has been called Pete, but I don't care for it, not enthusiastically," replied the doctor. "He is only seven years old, so he can afford a new name. I think I'll call him Sanitas."

"Oh, no, Mark!" protested his wife.

"Oh, yes, Mildred!" cried the doctor. "First you have a tonic and then you have health; I think it's a logical and musical name, encouraging to my patients. 'Here comes the old doctor with Sanitas,' with health, you see! It ought to make them feel better at once — if they know what the word means! What do you say, Ladybird?"

"I say it's silly and silly, like you, Doctor Porter! It will answer," said Nancy, taking her father's arm to go to the house as Stephen jumped into the buggy and drove Sanitas to the barn to be introduced to old Tonic, watching his coming from an open window, doubtless much surprised.

"We must go home," said Mimi, halting.

Nancy caught her hand with her left one. "No,

indeed; you are to stay to tea. I have learned how to make scones, and I'm going to prove it," she cried.

At the head of the steps, as they all returned to the house, stood a tall, gaunt woman, the mainstay of the Porter family, faithful Letty Hetty, who " did the housework," but whose service was rather that of love than hire. And truly did the Porters return this love, which in no other way could ever be repaid.

" So that's the new horse? " observed Letty Hetty to the doctor. " He's handsome, looks young. Is it goin' to be safe for you to drive Nancy around with him? For I don't suppose you mean to stop takin' Nancy with you 's long 's you and her is each other."

" Letty Hetty," said the doctor solemnly, " when I go out without my assistant Chagford's doom is sealed. They'll all have to die incontinently, for there will be no Doctor Porter to save them. But I have a horse there that has a guarantee for safety that makes his seven years as seven times seven. Last year he received the Nobel peace prize. When he travels along the road, at an apparently reckless pace, he is always mentally repeating Watts' Hymns, and when he is touched by the whip, instead of resenting it he sits up on his haunches, waves his fore

hoofs and repeats: 'Neigh! Neigh!' Meaning by this that he is one of the Society of Friends and will not resent a blow. It is inconvenient to have him sit up thus in the shafts, but safe! There couldn't be a safer horse. May I have Nancy when I go out with him?"

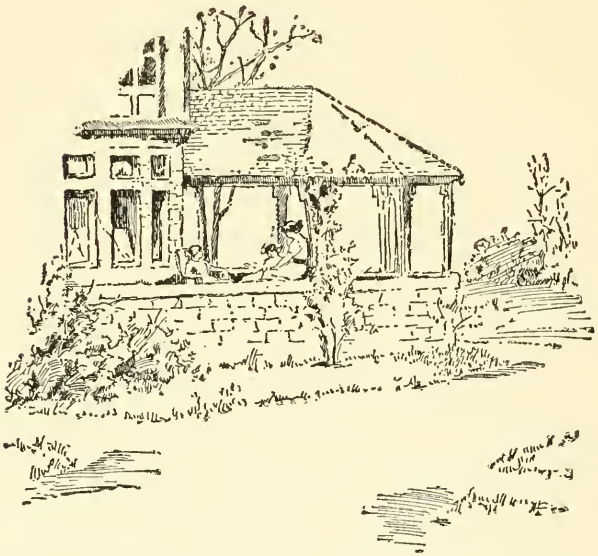
Letty Hetty was used to the doctor. "If anybody could hear the way you go on at home, I declare to the land, Doctor Porter, you wouldn't have a patient! They'd be afraid to trust a cat to you, makin' sure you was crazy," she declared, with a laugh that expressed her sense that the merry doctor's form of lunacy was not undesirable. "Come along, Nancy, if you're goin' to make scones for tea, as you said. An' speakin' of doctorin' a cat, Bumblebee's old enough — six years old! — to know how to play with a string, or stop playin' with one! An' Fred's a dog of an age that ought to settle down. But, Jerusalem Halifax Gentleman, Bumbly got to haulin' a string a while ago, an' Fred chased her, an' she actually swallowed it! I had to pretty much the same as unravel her to save her life!"

"Oh, Letty Hetty!" laughed Nancy. "You are funny! I'm going to bring Mimi and Doris into your kitchen to see the scones made and improve

their minds. I'm glad you saved my dear tortoise-shell Bumblebee, though you never will see that to *un*ravel must be to sew up!"

Nancy and the other two girls ran off after Letty Hetty. The doctor, his wife and Rick watched them disappear.

"Our house is full of the sweetness of dawning young womanhood since our girl turned sweet six-teen," murmured the doctor thoughtfully.



CHAPTER II

OLD WAYS IN NEW DAYS

HERE'S Nancy?" asked Doctor Porter early the following morning.

"I don't know, Mark. She got up before we did; I heard her stirring around by six. You told her to be ready betimes and she certainly was, but I don't know what has becomes of her since breakfast," returned his wife, pausing with her finger in the grocer's book which she was examining.

"I happen to have no patient that must be seen before eleven this morning, but we must start out, if we're to try the new horse and get back even by that time," said the doctor, rumpling his hair in a way he had when he was getting impatient. "Maybe Letty Hetty has seen her. Letty Hetty! Letty Hetty! Where's Nancy?" he called, going toward Letty Hetty's domain.

"Wouldn't you suppose you'd know where she'd be?" Letty Hetty asked, appealing to Doctor Porter, the inconsiderate, to Doctor Porter the experienced in Nancy.

"When she was goin' out for the first time in her life with you drivin' a horse who wasn't Tonic, where'd she be likely to be but out in the barn makin' it up to Tonic before she started?"

"Oh, of course!" agreed the doctor, and hastily departed by the back door in pursuit of his assistant.

He found Nancy with her hat thrown on a feed sack near by, to get it out of her way while she held Tonic's brown nose tight with one hand and rubbed his ears with the other, her cheek laid warmly against the long brown face. Her eyes were wet as she raised her face to smile at her father, hearing his step.

"It isn't that I'm not glad we're going to make life easy to the old dear," she needlessly explained, "but that I'm sorry we have to. Since Tonic is getting old I don't want him to work, but, oh, daddy dearest, getting old seems such a hard thing when it comes picking at the knots which have been tied fast for so long! Resting Tonic — deposing him it really is — is like the first sound of saying goodbye to him. It isn't Tonic alone — I don't want any

changes to come; we're so happy!" Nancy's voice faltered.

"Why, Assistant! Not borrowing trouble! Distinctly against our code, you know," the doctor shook his head at her, but put out his hand to draw her to him at the same time. "I bought Tonic, a young horse five years old, a year before you were born, my dawtie; that puts him at twenty-two. He will last several years more, Dame Trot, but only with the care we're giving him. Don't anticipate the final parting."

"I gave him lots of sugar and told him all about it," said Nancy, shaking off her melancholy. "I think he must know we are loyal to him. Were you waiting for me?"

"Yes; Sanitas is at the gate with Stephen. We have to hurry a little, or we won't get a drive. Come on, daughterlein," replied the doctor, leading the way around the house. Nancy sprang into the buggy, then flattened her slender body to let her father step past her to the driver's side. The new horse started off enthusiastically, and Nancy was too young not to enjoy his pace, in spite of her tender jealousy for Tonic.

"Well, he does travel like a bird!" she sighed contentedly.

"Just wait till he has been taken out from his peaceful slumbers some night, and has to wait an hour while I am listening to the oft-repeated tale of how Granny Marvin went down to death's door while I was so long getting to her! Sanitas will be less eager to take a hill in the morning!" chuckled the doctor. "Experience is a sobering thing to horse and man! I have been turning over in my mind your saying that not only for Tonic, but for us all, you dreaded old age and change. Don't you know yet, my Nancy, that the memory of joys outlived are part of our dower?"

"Dower?" questioned Nancy.

"Surely. The good things we inherit, our own personal gifts, these are our dower, but so are our joys, and our sorrows as well, till the memory of them together make the crowning dower of our life. I don't want you to be too afraid of grief, dearie. You see when I am an old man, too old to drive you about, you will still have every happy drive we have taken together. And when your blessed mother is old you will not have lost the mother you knew when her hair was brown and her eyes bright," the doctor gently preached, pulling Nancy closer to him with his left arm, as Sanitas soberly mounted a hill.

"Ah, it isn't having you old I mind, as long as I have you!" murmured Nancy.

"Even then you will not have lost us," returned her father, answering what Nancy did not say in words.

"Then you are my dower!" said Nancy, resisting her desire to cry.

"As sure as you are mine!" cried the doctor, willingly chiming in the more cheerful key.

"Are we going to see the Ladies of the Lake?" asked Nancy, with a slight squeeze and shake of her father's arm to tell him that she had absorbed his lesson, but dared not trust herself to dwell on it.

"We'll 'cry in on them,' as people say in Scotch stories and, for all I know, in Scottish real life," said Doctor Porter. "We'll show Sanitas to them and to Miss Dorinda and Miss Belinda Allaire, then we'll get Grandma Emerson out on the steps to admire us in passing, and then we'll be at home, and fully due."

They turned up the lake road and drove fast to the remarkable piece of architecture which had been called "Foster's Folly," by Chagford until it had been bought by the four Coggs girls. These double twins, Maizie and Daisy — properly Mary and Margaret — and Taizie and Hazie, otherwise Teresa

and Hazel — were nearly three years and one year older than Nancy. They had come into an immense fortune through a lawyer's chance discovery that they were the grandchildren of old Peter Debbs, the illiterate but wealthy owner of the mills at Chagford Falls. Although the Coggs children had been poor and uneducated all the fifteen, and nearly fourteen years which the two pairs of twins had lived before their change of fortune, they were bright and quick to learn. From having been the joke of the three Chagford towns they had soon passed into one of the chief boasts of their adopted home. Such warm hearts had the Coggs girls, such a generous desire to make everybody else as happy as they were, and such keenness to estimate people and things justly and to copy the best, that now when Maizie and Daisy were eighteen, and Taizie and Hazie seventeen they differed in manner and speech from the other Chagford girls only in being more offhand, spontaneous and breezy; they no longer made the mistakes that set the town laughing at them. The Coggs double twins were devoted to Nancy Porter because she it was who had interposed her friendship between them and the unkind comments of their new world when they had first come into it. She had found for them Miss Rhoda Drummond,

who had been their teacher, companion and guide, "their animate copy-book," Hazie called her, the gentle little lady who lived with them, to whom they owed their training in that world to which their new wealth had called them. Miss Drummond was out on the broad piazza with both pairs of twins when the doctor and Nancy drove up the long avenue which led to the house.

"Didn't know you!" called Taizie Coggs. "No matter how often you said you would, we couldn't think you'd get another horse."

By the time this sentence was ended Nancy was near enough to hear it; she had missed its beginning, but guessed it.

"He's nice, but Tonic is dearer," said Nancy. "No, I'm not going to get out! The doctor forbids it."

"You're going to get out to be hugged, Nancy Porter, doctor or no doctor, and even if you pass from hand to hand right back into the carriage," cried Maizie.

"No, she isn't, Maizie," said the doctor. "We are merely trying Sanitas and must not stop anywhere longer than we have already been here. Nancy, weren't you going to ask the twins down to install you?"

"Sure enough! I forgot it! I'm going to move into my sixteenth birthday present to-morrow; won't you all come for my housewarming and moving?" asked Nancy.

"Move into your birthday present!" echoed Daisy. "Oh, the room! Yes, of course we'll be there. Is it done?"

"All ready for the furniture, and that's at the station," said the doctor gleefully. "Nancy is going to acquire her own withdrawing-room and read us her Declaration of Independence to-morrow."

"Do you know what it will really be?" asked Nancy, laying her hand on her father's to delay his departure an instant, as he gathered up the reins.

"Yes. The room the doctor never willingly quits for a moment!" laughed Miss Drummond.

"Just that," cried Nancy. "When I get my own sitting-room I'll never have another hour to myself."

"You'll see!" the doctor growled. "You'll beg me tearfully to peep at you, miss, but I'll never look at that sitting-room of yours. Remember that!"

"You're to stay to tea to-morrow," Nancy called back, as Sanitas trotted away. The doctor and his Nancy turned into the dignified avenue of elms leading up to "the stone house," a little farther on.

Here lived those two sisters, the Misses Allaire, whose melancholy seclusion from the world had been for ever broken up by the childish friendship of Nancy six years before. Nancy had no more devoted friends than Miss Dorinda and Miss Belinda.

"Ask the Misses Allaire to step to the door a moment, please," the doctor bade the maid who came to receive him when she heard the sound of wheels.

"Good morning, Miss Allaire; good morning, Miss Belinda! Nancy and I were passing, trying Tonic's successor. We beg your pardon for asking you to come to us, but we have not a moment for ceremony," the doctor said, raising his hat.

"Thank you for calling us," said Miss Dorinda, delicately holding together the fleecy scarf that enveloped her. "A fine looking young animal; I hope he is as good as he looks. Nancy, dear, are you well?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Dorinda. You and Miss Belinda wouldn't care to drive down to see the furniture moved into my new sitting-room, and have a cup of tea to-morrow, would you? I am asking all my friends," said Nancy, leaning forward eagerly.

"Indeed we should care for it! We are greatly

interested in that room. Dorinda and I have each a picture for it, Nancy," said Miss Belinda.

"Oh, thank you!" cried Nancy, flushing with pleasure. "I should be afraid of lots of people's choice of pictures, but I'll love what you choose."

"Don't be too sure, little Critic! Pictures and books offer an amazing field for differences of taste," said Miss Belinda.

"You've taught me music for ages; I know!" cried Nancy, waving her hand delightedly to these ladies, whose formal dignity used to frighten her.

"You're still in the process of getting spoiled, Assistant," observed the doctor, making a feint of pulling the lap robe over her.

"Isn't my world the dearest place! It's because I'm your girl, daddy dearest! Talk about my dower! My dower seems to me to have been born Nancy Porter of Chagford, where you and mother had lived for fifteen years before I came along, planting flowers for me to gather, so to speak!" cried Nancy.

"At least we are not ungrateful, Dame Trot!" said the good doctor. "You want Cordie at your housewarming, of course? There she is."

Nancy looked. Yes, there was Cord, Cordelia Tilden, only nothing could have been less suitable

than a stately Roman name for this small elf. No one of all Nancy's circle had changed less in the past three years than this small creature whom she and Mimi and Doris had adopted, in spite of the scant two years' difference in ages, when the three little friends had been eleven. Cordie still lived with the Slocums, crippled Lydia, aging Mercy, in their small house on the edge of Chagford.

Cordie did not seem oppressed by her solitary condition; she got on well with the meagre life of the household, though the Porters took care that it should be generously supplemented, and she actually enjoyed the housework which she was expected to perform for "board and schooling." She was a dark, wiry little thing, now nearly fourteen, but looking twelve, full to overflowing of bottled-up mischief, which did not always stay bottled up.

"Hi-yi, Nancy!" she shouted now, espying the object of her most fervent admiration.

"Hallo, there, you old blessed! Where'd you get him?"

"Meaning me, Cordie?" inquired the doctor.

"No, sir; I've seen you, Doctor Porter dear, but meaning that dandy new horse," explained Cord, coming to a standstill beside the buggy.

"Not from any of your tribe, Gypsy Cord," said

the doctor, who always pretended to believe that Cord had not been the grandchild of the old woman whose passing out of the world he had long ago made easier, but was a gypsy vagrant, or else an elfin changeling.

"No, 'cause the gypsies would steal him, but they wouldn't sell him. He's a peach!" commented Cord, unabashed. "What d'you s'pose? Lydia says she's got to have some salt codfish, or dear knows what'll happen! So they hustled me off to get some at the grocers', had me 'scused till recess for it."

"It's an excellent tonic, Cord," said the doctor gravely. "Much of the strength of our New England character was derived from salt codfish. Lydia is right to have it when she craves it."

"I'm not kickin'," said Cord cheerfully. "I'd 'nough rather be out till recess catchin' codfish than shut up on such a nice morning."

"Cordie, you'll grow up into an ignorant little Indian!" cried Nancy. "Come down to-morrow afternoon to my housewarming. My furniture's come."

"I'll be there, like to," Cord accepted the invitation. Then the doctor and Nancy heard her singing shrilly as they drove away: "Tell Mother I'll

Be There," a dismal air which Cord had picked up in her travels and which she sang, without the slightest intention of irreverence, in a manner that transformed it into a jubilant ditty.

"Grandma Emerson, Grandma dear!" called Nancy at the gate of the tiny house which sheltered the little old lady who was grandmother to everybody by adoption and grandmother to nobody by blood, the little house to which Nancy and all the Chagford children had always considered it a treat to go.

Dean Okley, the young sempstress who made her home with the dear little old lady, opened the door.

"Grandma Emerson is making a pie, Nancy; she asked me to let you in," said Dean, beaming on Nancy, who had helped her three years before in an hour of dire need.

"No, father won't let me get out; he's hurrying," said Nancy. "We were going to show grandma and you our new horse. Then I wanted to tell you that the housewarming was to be to-morrow; my sitting-room furniture has come."

"What's that?" called a cheerful voice from the hall. Grandma Emerson slipped out past Dean, her hands floury.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating, but the proof that I was making a pie is here," she said. "If you're asking us to your housewarming, Nancy child, I'm going, for one. I may be eighty, but I'd hate like sixty to be out of the fun!"

"There wouldn't be nearly as much fun if you were out of it, nice little Grandma!" cried Nancy.

"And that's the new horse, Mark? Well, he's pretty, if that's all, but I do hate to see another animal in those old shafts! Suppose you get a new buggy, then we won't feel so bad!" added Grandma Emerson slyly.

"What a dear little thing she is!" said Nancy, as they drove away, just as she always said after seeing this bright tiny woman, whose courage was high, yet whose heart was like the heart of a little child, merry, innocent and true.

"You see that old age is not always undesirable, my lassie," observed the doctor.

"Perhaps you'd better leave me at the Willis'," suggested Nancy. "Amabel is sure to keep me. Amabel has so many things to tell me lately."

"Very well; it might be safer, for I've really no time left that I can spare," said the doctor, consulting his frank-faced watch, a wide, honest sort of circle, with an expression, Nancy had always in-

sisted, that "made it look like Doctor Mark Porter's watch."

"Amabel is far more grown up than you are, Dame Trot."

"She always was," said Nancy. "I suppose it's because she's the prettiest girl in Chagford. The boys are attentive to her and that makes her grow up."

"The boys are not appreciative of my daughter?" hinted the doctor.

"Oh, they are all nice to me, just as nice as they can be," Nancy blushed a little. "But you know they treat me like sixteen. They treat Amabel like twenty. I wouldn't know how to behave if they weren't kind and chummy. Amabel got a poem, all about her beauty, the other day; one of the boys wrote it. She said he was impertinent, but I think she liked it. It was the funniest thing, daddy dearest! You never could tell what size its feet were, nor how many it had — the metre was dreadful! But I dare say I should have been proud of it, too, if it had been written to me." Nancy ended with a laugh that showed her a little girl still, though her sixteenth birthday did lie a month behind her.

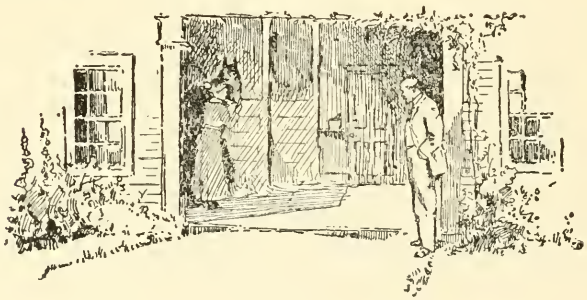
"Do you suppose you wouldn't have minded whether it scanned or not, if it celebrated you, Lady

Anne? Small use my grounding you in the English poets then!" said the doctor, amused and pleased by Nancy's wholesome youth, her willingness to be still "the doctor's little girl." "Here's where you leave me, then," he added, turning Sanitas at the Willis gate, for her to get out.

Nancy sprang lightly to the ground, then went around to take leave of Sanitas, as was her custom with Tonic.

"Good-bye, New Friend," she said, plucking a handful of grass and giving it to him. "You must not mind that I can't love you like the old friend! I'll like you, too, you know. You really are a dear. But I've had such nice times with Tonic all my life."

"We'll have no end of nice times with this new friend also, girl of mine," said the doctor, with a farewell smile, speaking, as all of us do, out of his certainty of the days to come.



CHAPTER III

NANCY'S HOUSEWARMING

CHAGFORD had a van! It had not always had one, nor did it carry this glory with perfect meekness, being still unused to it. But Chagford Falls had built tenement flats for the mill hands, and flats and vans as naturally follow one another as frogs follow tadpoles.

The Chagford van was to bring from the station the exciting new-old furniture that was part of Nancy's birthday gift. Her birthday gift proper was a new room. There was a small room off the Porter library in which hung the portrait of Nancy's great-grandmother, the portrait that had been Nancy's intimate friend throughout her childhood and was still a companion to her, in an older way. This small room was in the southeastern corner of the house. As Nancy's sixteenth birthday gift Doctor Porter had the room extended, built out into a room

twenty-five feet square. One side of this room, the side looking toward the south and the pretty hills surrounding Chagford, was largely window. A wide window, divided into three parts, its top ending in arches, let all the view, all the sunshine in winter and the south breeze in summer, into this room. A wide window-seat, cushioned in green and heaped with silken-covered down pillows that insisted on laziness, ran all along this window. Another window looked toward the east, another toward the north, and beside this north window grew a pine tree, lovely when draped in wintry white, deliciously fragrant in the summer's heat. There was a fireplace between the north and eastern windows, and over it hung the portrait of Nancy Porter the elder, in the place of honour. For this room was to be Nancy's sitting-room, her very own, built and furnished for her, because, her father said, "she had put up with him for sixteen years." The work of this room had been belated and the furniture tardy in coming, as work and furniture often is, so that Nancy had not taken possession on her birthday as had been intended. Everything was ready at last, though more than a month late, and Nancy was wildly excited when the van appeared, bringing her furniture.

"And here is Grandma Emerson, actually first of all the girls!" cried Nancy, darting out to meet the little old lady and Dean, escorting her.

"Mother says I have asked you to the queerest party this town ever saw, Grandma darling. She says I ought to have waited to get the furniture in so my guests could at least be seated. But I thought it was half the fun seeing things come in and be unwrapped."

"Certainly; more than half," agreed Grandma Emerson. "Then we'll all advise you where to place your furniture and we'll disagree frantically, so that you'll be half-past seventeen before your room is in order, you'll try so hard to suit us all."

"It's really true that I don't know where to put you," said Nancy. "I think I'll borrow a rocking-chair from the library and set you in the farthest corner where you can see —"

"And not be seen?" asked Grandma Emerson blithely. "There are other guests coming, Nancy child."

Nancy again ran out, this time to greet all the girls, who had met at Mimi Hunt's and come on together, Louise Willis, now a full-blown young lady, past twenty, sweet and pretty and wholesome as ever, and Amabel, who was seventeen, but held

herself older than Louise, who was much more simple than her younger sister. Amabel was decidedly the handsomest girl in all three Chagfords, just as she had been acclaimed to be when the pageant was held of which, for her beauty, she was made the queen. With them were the two pairs of Coggs twins, big and breezy, well dressed and quietly dressed, now that they had learned what constituted good taste, yet always with the effect of showiness, for this was part of their make-up. Gentle Miss Drummond was with them. Mimi, Doris and Cord completed the group which Nancy hailed jubilantly.

"You're to stand around and watch — No, you needn't! You may all pile on the window-seat, but if the Misses Allaire get here before the chairs are in you must unpile!" Nancy ordered them. "The men are slow untying the ropes at the end of the van, but I'm glad they are; I love expecting!"

"Haven't you bought any furniture? Your father, I mean?" asked Doris.

"Not the smallest footstool!" cried Nancy. "When his patients heard he was going to give me this room they all asked to be allowed to send the furniture, old furniture, as that's what we wanted. So every single piece has been given to me by somebody in one of the Chagfords and has a story. Ex-

cept the pieces Aunt Mary Lawrence has sent from Boston, and I'm wild to see those, because her house is just packed with old mahogany that makes me dizzy, it's so splendid! Yet there's nothing about it that ought to make anybody giddy. And I know one thing beforehand! She's sent me a real Paul Revere porringer, made by him, to set on my book shelves!" Nancy pointed to the low shelves built in between the fireplace and the door, not yet filled by her books.

"Are you going to set the porringer there and revere it?" asked Louise demurely.

"Louise! A pun, in a new empty room, that can't protect itself!" remonstrated Nancy.

The draymen began carrying in Nancy's furniture, and Letty Hetty appeared, armed with knife and scissors, to rip the heavy cord that sewed the burlap around it. First a chair appeared, straight-backed, with twisted rods and an ecclesiastical pointed top; it was upholstered in a greenish blue tapestry, faded to the softest tint.

"This belonged to Mrs. McCutcheon's grandmother; it was part of the wedding outfit of her sister, who died three days before her wedding day," said Nancy, reading the card that hung on the chair's fine back. Her face softened at the thought

of that other girl whose romance had ended three generations agone in its thwarted dawn.

All the girls hurried over to examine this relic, whose melancholy they enjoyed. Once the beginning of getting the furniture out of the van was made the work of bringing in went on fast. Letty Hetty would not allow any one to help her disclose the treasures, so it was not long before there was an accumulation awaiting her knife and scissors. A slender-legged clover-leaf table came to light, sent from "the stone house" by the Allaire sisters, which had seen nearly two centuries pass. There was a table with a deep drop leaf that Nancy hailed for her lamp, chairs of venerable age and many sorts. But the chief wonder of all was indeed Mrs. Lawrence's gift, a mahogany desk, made like a chest of drawers, from which the desk lid slanted backward, ending in a flat top. Two pulls with small knob handles were to be drawn out to support the desk lid when it was open, its trimmings were fine old English brass, and within the desk delightful little drawers and cubby-holes flanked the little door which, directly in the middle, opened by a small key. Here a clever person could find the secret hiding-place which was part of the desks of the time. This old desk, a note in its upper drawer told Nancy, had

come from England when Judge Sewall was living in Boston the days that he has left recorded in his diary. At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, this desk had held and dispatched many a letter for the stainless patriot Warren, who fell at Bunker Hill.

"Oh!" gasped Nancy, with dilated eyes, gazing at the desk with all her hero-worshipping soul stirred. "Oh!"

"Could you use it?" asked Doris, awe-struck.

"I —" Nancy hesitated, then took resolution. "I must," she said firmly. "But I must be a better American than ever, or I'll be afraid of that desk's disowning me. Girls, help me set it there, will you? It must be on the other side of the fireplace, opposite the books."

The Coggs girls sprang up and pushed Nancy away. "Trot along, little Nancy; we're the ones when it comes to muscle!" one of the twins cried.

The desk, empty, was not heavy, and it took but a few moments to place it where it looked perfectly in harmony with its surroundings. By way of preparing to live up to its patriotic requirements and reverence Nancy placed the Paul Revere porringer, which had come to light in one of the desk drawers,

on the flat top of the desk, and fell back against her mother to admire the effect.

"A porringer made by Paul Revere and a desk at which Warren sat!" she murmured, in a sort of coma of bliss. "Mother, what do you think father and Rick will say! I wonder where Rick is, why he doesn't get here?"

"And it's a crying shame the doctor can't see your room put together, Nancy child," added Grandma Emerson. "Where is Mark, Mildred?"

"He was sent for, on an urgent case, to Chagford Falls," said Mrs. Porter. "He was as disappointed as a child not to see the furniture brought in, but he has had a good many years of practice to teach him that a doctor can't count on even a simple home pleasure. He'll be just as happy when he comes and sees all these really beautiful things in place and a fire on the hearth. You're going to have a hearth fire, hostess?"

"Oh, dear me, yes; I can't wait for it to get cool enough for it. It will be at sunset," said Nancy. "Here is the Allaire carriage at last! We have almost everything opened."

"Say, Nancy," said Maizie Coggs, looking painfully embarrassed, which was not usual to any of the twins. "You know our long suit isn't old family

contraptions, furniture — not even ancestors, though I suppose we had some of some sort! But we didn't have anything old to give you — "

"I don't want — " began Nancy.

"Now wait a minute, missy!" Maizie interrupted in return. "If we Coggs weren't in this new room somehow, we'd all turn green with envy and rage, and then die, a twin at a time, and be put under other green things! So we thought we'd get a rug. I guess it's all right, because we — Taizie and I — went down to Boston and got your Aunt Mary Lawrence to pick it out. It's an antique something or other — begins with a letter that you wouldn't expect from the sound, and ends in *stan,* but that's the best I can do for you as to the name of the thing. It's out in the car; Elijah brought it down after he left us; went back after it. I thought you'd better get it down before all these old pieces are in place; they look as if they'd root in about five minutes and never move again!"

Hazie jumped up and signalled frantically to Elijah, the Coggs' chauffeur and the brother of the doctor's Stephen. Elijah shouldered a great roll of burlap and Letty Hetty hastily ran out to help him steady it by thrusting her capable shoulder under an end of the burden.

When the rug was unrolled and spread out on the floor, which it covered, except by exactly the right amount of space of the dark oiled wood to enhance it, everybody exclaimed. The Misses Allaire, waiting in the doorway to enter when the rug was down, and Mrs. Porter, alone of them all knew precisely how valuable and beautiful this great rug, with its soft, dull colours and silky surface, was.

"My dears, my dear, generous twin children, you should not have bought Nancy such a rug as this!" protested Mrs. Porter. It was exactly like the Coggs to introduce so carelessly a gift of such precious beauty.

"I'd like to know any one else better worth getting a rug for!" demanded Daisy Coggs.

"The only trouble is we couldn't find one that came anywhere near what we'd like to get for Nancy — or for any Porter!" chimed in Taizie.

"Besides there's such a lot of us; neither of us got more than a quarter of a rug," added Hazie.

"Oh, what's the use of talking as if it was anything!" cried Maizie. "You know it was just a picnic for us! The only thing I care about is whether it will do, if you honestly like it — especially now I see it's got to live with Paul Revere

stewpans — porringers? Well, it's all the same! — and a Bunker Hill desk that came over with a judge in it. I guess there's something wrong with my repeating Mrs. Lawrence's note, but never mind. If you don't like the rug, back it goes to the dealer and we'll get something else."

"Like it! Dear twins, it's sumptuous!" cried Mrs. Porter.

"Like it!" cried Nancy, kneeling upright; she had been down on all fours caressing its surface. "Well, my goodness! Like it!"

"I don't know much about rugs," said Letty Hetty, whose voice was always heard in family events, "but it strikes me this is the kind of rug that hadn't ought to be swept on a week day, it's so kind of solemn-noble. It'll be much as ever if I'll dare sweep it at all; I guess I'll wipe it once in so often with a silk handkerchief."

Before Nancy had kissed the last twin — she immediately began thanking them wordlessly in this way and each one held her and hugged her — Miss Dorinda Allaire said: "We have brought you a picture, Nancy, as we told you."

"But you sent the table!" protested Nancy, beginning to feel quite overcome by all these unforeseen results of her housewarming.

Miss Belinda smiled. "So we had to bring a picture to hang over it and another to hang — elsewhere! They are pictures we wanted you to have because we love them."

The sisters slipped the wrappings from two large pictures and revealed, first the exquisite poetic "Madonna of the Rose Garden," which hangs in the Louvre, painted by Botticelli as only a painter and poet in one paints, and Titian's "Man with the Glove," mysterious, pensive, powerful. They were beautiful reproductions, brown in tone and true to the originals, and they were framed in exactly the same tint of fine oiled wood.

Nancy loved music, poetry and pictures with natural and carefully trained taste. Tears of pure delight arose in her eyes, her hands clasped and unclasped in the way she had when deeply moved.

"I can't, I can't!" she gasped. And her friends saw that the wonderful afternoon had really been too much for her.

'I guess you no need to, Nancy," said Letty Hetty. "I guess they all know a regiment couldn't stand up under such a fire as this. Speakin' of fire, don't you want I should lay the fire in here? But I guess I'll wait for Richie; he lays a fire with his long, violin-playin' fingers to beat any one I ever

met. Come along, Nancy, and help me with what we've got to do for your party."

Nancy welcomed the avenue of escape that Letty Hetty opened for her. She ran after her and cried a few happy tears into the kitchen roller. Then she felt calmer, and began to dance and sing as she helped Letty Hetty get her mother's delicate old sprigged china cups and saucers on the trays with which she meant to serve her guests.

"If only daddy dearest would hurry home! And Rick. I can't wait to see their faces when they stand in that door and look at my treasures. Did you ever, ever in all your life, Letty Hetty, hear of a girl having a present of a built-on room and then having it filled by such things, from such dear, dear people? I wonder if the sixteenth birthday is the mahogany birthday, Letty Hetty? Like the silver wedding, you know."

"Like's not, though it looks more like curled maple," said Letty Hetty, with unexpected sense of the quality of woods. "If you tip the sugar bowl, Nancy, your block sugar'll be pavin' blocks, on the floor. Suppose you try to calm down to this sublimary sphere."

"There isn't any sublunary sphere for me, Letty Hetty," laughed Nancy. "The whole world is sky

high, far over the moon. Just as soon as Rick comes I'm going to have a dance: it's the only way! I've got to 'hooray with my heels,' like the little girl who had a little curl."

Nevertheless Nancy managed to quiet down to the point of helping with the tea and cake, the candied fruits and other dainties without menace to their safety.

"Now I can go back and have a good time without crying. If you hadn't got me away, Letty Hetty, I believe I should have cried, I was so excited," said Nancy, falling back to survey with satisfaction the pretty table which she and Letty Hetty had arranged for her party, and to the steadying of her nerves.

Then she ran back to her new room, and paused a moment to survey its perfections from the doorway.

"I wish I could hug the world! I feel about six, instead of sixteen, and as gay as thistledown," she cried. It was the last time that Nancy Porter would ever feel wholly like a little girl. Joy abundant lay before her, but that was the last instant of her actual child-life.

"Here is Rick!" said Mrs. Porter, looking glad. "I hope the doctor is not far behind him."

Rick came slowly; his feet fairly dragged on the steps. Nancy flew to meet him.

"How late you are! You never saw such a wonderful — Rick, what's the matter?" Nancy's voice turned shrill on the last note, for Rick's face frightened her.

"Rick, where's the doctor?" Mrs. Porter had followed Nancy at that change in her voice. Her own voice was low, muffled, and she caught at the newel post for support.

"He is at Chagford Falls, or must be on the way home now," said Rick painfully, and stopped short.

"What has happened?" demanded Mrs. Porter. Grandma Emerson had an arm around her, and both the Allaires stood close to her by this time.

"There was a bad fire in one of the mills. The doctor went in to attend some one; there was an explosion in an engine room — "

Again Rick stopped, and the doctor's wife motioned for him to go on. Nancy made an inarticulate sound which she took for a question.

"There was a second explosion," said Rick.

"The doctor — is — " Mrs. Porter's eyes alone finished her question.

"He was hurt," said Rick.

"They always break — the news — like that," murmured Mrs. Porter, swaying forward.

"No, no, no! Mother, no!" cried Rick, using Nancy's name for her unconsciously. "He is not dead. Truth, he is not dead. But he is hurt; his eyes are hurt. It is an injury to the optic nerve, Doctor Davidson thinks; so does our doctor."

"Not blinded! Not my dearest, dearest daddy blind!" Nancy burst out hoarsely, with a sudden sharp sense of what this would mean to Doctor Porter.

"I don't know, Nancy dearest," said Rick, turning away.

CHAPTER IV

DARKNESS

OLD and young, the guests who had been so happily enjoying Nancy's housewarming stood in tense silence, fearfully wondering what the injury that had befallen their beloved doctor would prove to be. No one moved, nor spoke. It seemed an hour, though in reality it was not more than a quarter of that time, before the familiar, shabby buggy came in sight. Sanitas was driven by a man whom no one there knew, presumably some one from Chagford Falls, slowly, though Sanitas was restively trying to hurry home. Another buggy followed Doctor Porter's, Doctor Davidson's they soon recognized it to be. Beside Sanitas' driver sat Doctor Porter, and he was leaning forward, waving his hand toward the house.

Nancy felt a swift revulsion of emotion. The colour surged to her hair, she sprang forward, finding her voice joyfully.

"Mother, mother, it isn't true! He sees us! He is waving to us! Oh, mother, it isn't true!" she cried.

But when the buggy stopped at the gate and Nancy reached it, outstripping her mother in her swift race for it, Nancy caught at the post for support with one hand, the other clutching her throat. For her father was horribly pale and he sat vaguely smiling, plainly to reassure any one who might be seeing him, but — he did not turn toward Nancy; he did not know that she was there!

Mrs. Porter recognized this also, but her great-hearted love made her forget herself. She went quickly to the side of the carriage and before Doctor Davidson, who had got out to help the doctor, could reach him, she had her hand on his arm and was saying quietly: "Carefully, Mark, dear. The step is here."

Doctor Porter's calmness broke down under his wife's touch and before her pitiable courage. His face distorted and tears rolled down his white cheeks.

"Mildred!" was all he said, but in his voice was the agony of meaning that he had come home to her helpless, for her care.

"Put your hand on my shoulder, doctor," said

Doctor Davidson. "You're not too steady after the shock. Here's your Nancy."

For Nancy, too, had rallied, resolved to prove worthy of the great man wounded and of her soldier mother. As she came, a little slowly, out of the gate, Nancy accepted once and for ever, the supreme duty and joy of her life — to be the light that should illumine the remainder of her beloved father's darkened days.

"Where is my assistant?" asked Doctor Porter, with shaking voice.

For answer Nancy slipped her slender body under the extended arm that was searching for her.

"I don't believe you need to lean on Doctor Davidson, daddy dearest," she said quietly. "Take me for your staff."

"'Thy rod and thy staff they have comforted me,'" murmured the doctor to himself.

"That's true, Nancy; I have here a 'rod and a staff!' God has left me everything I need." He put his hand with heavy gentleness on Nancy's shoulder and pressed his wife's hand to indicate "his rod and his staff."

No one answered him and the three went up the path, Doctor Davidson following with tears, of which he was not ashamed, rolling down his face.

"Is there some one here?" asked Doctor Porter, pausing in the hall.

"I was having my housewarming —" began Nancy.

"True; I forgot for the moment, though I meant to hasten home for it," said her father. "How long ago it seems since we delivered your invitations yesterday! Only our close friends, then?"

"No one else," said Nancy. "Shall we go into the library?"

"Yes, dear," said the doctor, and they led him, groping, into his favourite room, and guided him to his big arm-chair.

Letty Hetty hurried in. Her face was disfigured by the tempestuous tears which had scalded it since Rick had told his news, but they were dried now.

She carried a tray on which fragrant coffee steamed and tempting little sandwiches of lettuce and chicken, made of her famous snowy bread, lay on a plate of the prettiest china in the house, cups and saucers and spoons ready for use, sugar in the fragile bowl that had been Doctor Porter's mother's, and thick cream in its matching jug.

"I guess you'll both feel like having something hot, comin' from a fire," she said, as if there were

nothing wrong beyond professional weariness, shared equally by the two physicians.

"You don't mean like having something cool, do you, Letty Hetty? The fire was hot, you know," said Doctor Porter, with an attempt at his usual manner.

He put out a shaking hand toward the tray. "That coffee smells so good! Pour Doctor Davidson and me a cup of it, please, Letty Hetty. There never was another such Letty Hetty for an emergency!"

Letty Hetty poured the coffee and passed a cup of it to Doctor Davidson, who needed it badly. Nancy placed the delicate handle of her father's cup between his fingers, and her mother put one of the sandwiches in the other hand. It was the first of a long chain of services.

"Ah!" breathed the doctor over the first sip of the coffee. Then: "Ah!" again. "You put in an extra great spoonful, Letty Hetty! It's delicious, sustaining, but a *leetle* stronger than I'd prescribe."

"'Twon't hurt anybody that's been to a fire," said Letty Hetty, thankful that if she must look as she felt sure she was looking at the sight of the doctor helpless like this, he could not see her face.

"You prescribe it for me, doctor, and I'll pre-

scribe it for you!" said Doctor Davidson, succeeding better in speaking cheerfully for having already had a dose of this prescription.

"Yes, I'll have another sandwich, Letty Hetty. I believe the reason Doctor Porter is a better doctor than I am is because you cook for him."

"No, 'tain't," said Letty Hetty promptly. "It's because he can sense people's complaints, both of body and soul, the minute he sets his two — hands on their pulses and on their bedposts." Letty Hetty had intended to say: "the minute he sets his two eyes on 'em," which her hearers quite well knew.

Doctor Porter managed a feeble laugh. "Letty Hetty, we've got to learn to accept our facts," he said.

Mrs. Porter had stood close to her husband's shoulder as he drank and ate, and Nancy hovered at his other side, leaning on the arm of his chair. Neither spoke, neither seemed to know that Doctor Davidson was in the room, but both were burning to ask the question that they dreaded to hear answered: "Was there any hope of cure?"

"No, Letty Hetty, thank you," said Doctor Porter. "Not another sandwich; I'm not hungry, but another cup of coffee, please. It's a more amiable temperature now; the first was scalding hot.

It has made me feel better, Letty Hetty. A practical form of love and pity works well, dear old friend."

Letty Hetty snatched up her tray and bolted. The doctor smiled sadly.

"She can't bear an allusion to our trouble. We may as well speak of it, Mildred, Nancy. As it must be borne the quicker we learn how to bear it the better," he said.

"What has happened?" asked Mrs. Porter, and her eyes sought Doctor Davidson.

"A fire in the Chagford Falls mill and an explosion," said Doctor Davidson. "Doctor Porter went in afterward. An engineer was hurt; I hadn't got there then. There was a second explosion. We think — he and I — that the explosion has injured his optic nerve."

Nancy looked up, wanting to ask further, but not speaking. She must have made clear to her father what she would have said, for he replied to her motion:

"We fear that it is incurable, Assistant. I shall go to Boston in a day or so and consult a specialist, but I do not want you two dear creatures to build false hopes on this, for Doctor Davidson and I are only too competent to pronounce my verdict, I am sure. I — I don't think we can talk about this, not

yet. Nancy, have you forgotten your guests? You must go back to them."

"Yes, father," said Nancy, rising at once from the arm of his chair, upon which she had seated herself to draw his head upon her shoulder while he briefly told them the story of his great affliction. Her father felt the trembling which came upon her as she thought of going in to face all those pitying, tearful faces which she pictured awaiting her, and understood it.

"Suppose we both go in to speak to your friends, Ladybird?" he suggested, rising. It was easier thus for Nancy, but a severe ordeal to the doctor; it was his way to get the worst of a thing over as soon as possible.

He laid a hand on his Assistant's shoulder and together they walked slowly toward Nancy's new and beautiful room, the room that the doctor had said, jestingly, the day before that he would never look at — and it was to prove a prophecy, that jest! In that short walk Nancy realized that she had not yet understood what had befallen. It drove the dawning knowledge home when she had to guide her father away from collision with the furniture in that familiar library.

They paused in the doorway of the new room.

Every one was still there who had come to Nancy's housewarming. No one knew whether to stay or go, whether Mrs. Porter and Nancy could be better helped by their presence or their absence, and, to be on the safe side, lingered. There was not one whose face was not disfigured by tears. Nancy immediately noticed that Rick was lacking.

As the doctor stood hesitating on the threshold, not knowing whether there was any one near for him to greet, his hand on Nancy's shoulder, her sweet face white and grief-stricken, Taizie Coggs uttered a sound between a sob and a groan, opened the window at her back and jumped out, followed by Hazie and Daisy, but Maizie stood her ground, tearing her handkerchief to shreds, though she needed it badly.

No one spoke for an instant, then Grandma Emerson got up and came toward the waiting doctor.

"Mark, dear, I'm awful glad that we can see you, anyway. It might have been worse, the worst of worsts! You'll find that outer eyes won't matter much, after a while, as long as you've got the inside eyes of love. And you have these dear blue-gray young eyes to see all beautiful things for you. Mark, dear, I'm sorrier than words, but I'm glad, too. You'll see how happy even this will make

you." The dear little old lady smiled up at him, though he could not see her, and she was crying, but she spoke sincerely.

"Give me time, Grandma Emerson," said the doctor. "Please let me shake hands with you, dear friends, and tell you how glad I am that you made Nancy's housewarming pleasant for her."

Nancy braced herself. "Come in and let me show you everything, daddy dear," she said. "The Coggs twins gave me this wonderful rug, a regular queen of rugs! It almost covers the floor. And over here is a desk that came to America about the year fifteen hundred: it was used by Warren Hastings. And this silver porringer was made by Longfellow — Paul Revere's ride —" Nancy broke down, and her voice silenced. She could not go on with her father putting out a hand aimlessly to feel of what she was showing him.

"I think your father will feel more like being shown your room to-morrow, dearie," said Miss Belinda gently. "He has had a great shock. We are going to say good night, Doctor Porter. In the morning, after you have rested, we will come down to learn that you are feeling better, or I hope so. Dear Doctor Porter, you know we all hope so!".

"THE DEAR LITTLE OLD LADY SMILED UP AT HIM."

The doctor put out his hand — in the wrong direction, but Miss Belinda took it.

"I should have been blind all my life if I had not seen what friends I have in you all, even the children here," he said.

Cord uttered a wail that startled them all, and flung herself bodily on her adored doctor. "I love you! I love you! I'm going to — to do something for you somehow!" she shrieked.

"Yes, little Cordie, I'm certain you will," Doctor Porter soothed her. And the wild outburst had the effect of calming the others so that Louise, Amabel, Mimi and Doris came quietly in turn to put their hands into their old friend's hands and wish him good night without making the sorrow he felt in them hard to meet.

"Stay with me, Grandma Emerson," said Mrs. Porter, meeting the little old lady in the hall.

"Certainly, Mildred, my dear," she answered briskly. "Dean, you run along home and maybe one of the girls will stay with you. Be sure you fix the stove draughts the last thing, and you'd better let Araminta stay in all night, because she's mourning her kitten I gave away, and she's taken cold, besides. Mildred, I wanted to ask if you'd like me

to stay here, but I didn't know what good I'd do at eighty!"

"You've helped us bear all the joys and sorrows of our lives, and that makes you able to comfort as no one else can," said Mrs. Porter.

"Mark blind! Grandma, I can't think of it!"

"You no need to, Mildred; you'd better not. No fear of Mark's being blind, a man with such vision as his is, mostly in the heart and soul of him! 'Twould take a fatal explosion to make him blind — and even then he'd go on seeing, if our faith's true," said Grandma Emerson stoutly, even cheerily.

Grandma Emerson trotted briskly off "to see Letty Hetty a minute," she said, partly because she pitied that devoted woman suffering alone in the kitchen, partly because she wanted to let the Porters have an hour to themselves, rightly guessing that nothing could help them like the sense that they had one another.

Doctor Porter came back into the library and lay down on the couch. "I feel astonishingly tired," he said. "Has Doctor Davidson gone? We let him go without a word, Mildred and Nancy!"

"No. I talked with him, I thanked him," said Mrs. Porter, drawing her chair close to her husband. He put out his hand and Nancy came to sit

beside him, rumpling his hair after her habit. "Doctor Davidson said he would drop in early in the morning to talk over the trip to Boston," added Mrs. Porter.

"Are you going to take me, daddy of mine?" whispered Nancy. "I'd like beyond all telling to go."

"Oh, I suppose I shall take you, Nancy. Aren't you to be my Guide, as well as my Assistant, if this is as we think?" replied the doctor.

"Bread on the waters, fatherlings! You've been such a good, good guide to me!" said Nancy, letting her burning cheek drop on the gray hair she had so disarranged.

"Where's the boy?" asked the doctor suddenly, pressing Nancy close, but holding tight to his wife's hand.

"Why, yes! Where is Richie? We've all forgotten him," cried Mrs. Porter, springing up.

"I'll find him, mother," said Nancy.

It was not so easy as she thought. She searched the house, but there was no trace of Rick. At last, taking the lantern that hung ready for a visit to the stable, she mounted the attic stairs. There, where three years before Nancy, Mimi and Doris had placed their relinquished dolls to sit in solitary

state till a distant future might bring them into other hands, lay Rick. He had fallen asleep, utterly worn out with grief, his head on the cloths which protected the dolls from dust. He was pale, with dark circles under his eyes. Sixteen years old and a boy though he was, Rick had cried himself to sleep over the doctor's suffering.

Nancy stood looking at him by the flickering light of the lantern. He was as beautiful as a statue of youthful grief. The young girl's face softened and she looked down on him tenderly, with something motherly in her soft eyes.

"Dear Rick! He would willingly die if he could make us happy," she thought.

Rick stirred, aroused by the light, and jumped up. "Nancy, you frightened me! Where am I? How did I happen to be asleep here? What has — *Oh,* I remember! Nancy, I don't want to waken!"

"Rick, we've got to be brave," said Nancy. "It has come. We can't take it in yet, but I'm beginning to. Mother must be helped. I've been thinking and thinking, not very clearly yet, but I see what I've got to be. And so have you."

Rick did not stop to consider Nancy's manner of expressing herself; her meaning was clear enough.

"Nancy," he cried passionately, "your father is

the best, the noblest man in all this world! It makes me bitter to think that his eyes, *his* eyes that he used to help others, to cure pain, to cure trouble, to show them the right, should be taken from him! It seems as though God couldn't be good to let it be."

"Richie, don't!" said Nancy gently. "Father would not be comforted by that sort of talk. I thought of that, too, and then I saw, much as I love my father — Oh, Rick, do you know how I love him? I just worship him! I feel sometimes as if I'd burst, I love him so and respect him so, and am so proud, so *proud* of him! But I know that it is too soon to try to guess why this has happened. I think we can make the dear man happy. I think we can be eyes to him, partly, you and I. I'm pretty *sure* if such a small slip of a girl can appreciate and love Doctor Mark Porter so, God must, too! And He can't mean him unkindness. I'm trying, Rick, to feel as father has taught me to, and to wait to see why this fearful, *fearful* thing has come to him, of all the world."

"You're a good girl, Nancy dear! I never felt wicked like this before, but — it's tearing me!" cried Rick.

"Yes," said Nancy, showing instantly that she,

too, was torn. "But I can't tell — maybe father will be happy, just as happy, and we — Rick, I can't pretend to see anything but how awful it is, but I'm going to wait — *hard!* We've got to show how we love him. My daddy dearest will see that even if — Rick, Rick, I want him to see my face."

Rick put his arm around Nancy and let her cry on his shoulder. It did her good; the long effort to be brave had worn her and the fit of weeping steadied her nerves.

"We've got each other; that's a lot," said Rick, as they went down stairs at last.

"We've got us *all,* mother, father, too. When I think of that I could almost cheer. For suppose, oh, suppose, Richie, the explosion had killed him!" cried Nancy.

CHAPTER V

NANCY'S DOWER

THE Porters had gone to Boston together, all three of them. It would have been hard on either Mrs. Porter or Nancy to have been the one waiting at home to learn the verdict of the famous oculist whom Doctor Porter was to consult. They came back grave and quiet under the confirmation of the doctor's own sentence upon himself — he would never see again.

It remained now but to learn to live under the new conditions. This meant to both the doctor's wife and child to learn how best to help him to live under the swift blow which in an instant had transformed him from the busiest man in all Chagford, the one on whom the entire community seemed to lean its weight, into a man whose life of usefulness was apparently ended. His one task till he died would be the hardest of all to fulfil, because it

seemed fruitless, the task of patient endurance, folding his healing hands idly. They who loved him feared the effect of this feeling of uselessness upon the doctor: it was the subject constantly discussed in all the houses which he had visited so often.

"Do you think that Fred can be trained to lead me about, Dame Trot?" asked Doctor Porter. Nancy and he were sitting in the twilight which she loved because it let her look as she felt; she still could not realize that the bright sunlight did not reveal her to her father.

"I think I'd be so jealous of him if he did that I'd never feed him again!" cried Nancy. "You and I always went about together; I hope you won't discharge me now."

"Dearie, you are not to have your young life bound down to the steps of a blind man!" said the doctor.

"Dearie, my young life and my old life is bound up for ever in you, and if you try to shake me off, to spare me waiting on you, you will only break my heart. You are a doctor and you ought to know what harm it would do me to see you trying to get rid of me!" cried Nancy.

"Rid of you! My Nancy!" exclaimed the doctor.

"Daddy dearest, we have long known that your

outsight was nothing compared to your insight. So you still can see all the best things you ever saw. Keep me close to you till we are both old and old, and show me all the great things you see, while I show you the trifling things I see!" cried Nancy.

"You were going back to school as soon as that epidemic of measles was over," said the doctor, after a long silence in which they had sat with his hand on her hair after Nancy's outburst.

"But there isn't the least need of it! I learn more in a morning with you than all the colleges could teach me! I don't mind giving up school!" Nancy had a sudden inspiration: here was another way to make her father feel that he was still useful, and she was constantly seeking these ways.

"But I do mind losing my Latin and Greek, daddy dear, though I didn't mean to complain," she said, with a convincing effect of artlessness. Her sixteen years and her great, aching love were fast teaching Nancy a woman's sweet tricks, by which she makes her dear ones believe that their hidden desires are her open ones. "Mother grounded me well, you know, in the days when we did lessons together, and I was getting on at school in a way that made me a little vain! If it wouldn't be a nuisance and you would help me a while each day —

you know I don't want to bother you, fathery, but I'd like to keep on with Latin and Greek, and with my French and German and English literature. I could learn more from you than from my teachers. But maybe you'd find it a bore?"

"Nancy, when did I ever weary of reading with you? But I'm rusty, my dear, dreadfully rusty in my classics, and I don't pretend to have a French accent about my person! German is not so bad. I'm afraid all the Latin I remember is medical Latin," the doctor laughed, and Nancy thankfully saw that he aroused to her suggestion.

"It would all come back," she cried. "It's not so much gender and case and mood I need help in, but understanding of the literature of these languages. And how you would illumine Horace and Virgil and the Greek dramas for me! And Montaigne and Molière! Daddy dearest, if you would teach me I'd be the only really well educated girl anywhere!" cried Nancy.

"Nancy! Such stupendous conceit! My dear, I must indeed teach you — modesty and good judgment!" laughed the doctor, really quite animated for the moment and with the colourless monotony which had taken possession of his voice entirely warmed away.

"No, but it's true!" Nancy insisted sincerely, but triumphing in her effect.

"Girls at school learn from text books and miss a lot. I'd be soaked with intimate friendship with the poets. I know how you make a poem live! Oh, daddy, it will be such a happy thing, too, you and I and the Great Ones, all by ourselves!"

But the doctor's animation had faded. "I never sent in many bills which I might have collected, Nancy," he said. "I'm not sorry, you know; we've all decided many times that the bills we didn't collect often yielded most, but I shall not have as much to give you, Nancy, and henceforth I cannot earn for you."

"Oh, don't! As though money mattered!" cried Nancy, distressed.

"Not when you are sixteen, little girl, but perhaps later —" the doctor suggested.

"We've lived with only Letty Hetty to work for us, and haven't cared a bit about splendour," said Nancy. "We've been perfectly happy in our simple way, and while we could buy books and enjoy one another we never thought about other things. There's enough, daddy dear, to live this way if you didn't practise any more. And I'll never, never,

never be so unlike the doctor's little girl as to care one bit for being richer."

"Maybe you won't; I truly believe you won't," said the doctor, stroking her hair. "There's your unworldly mother. She married a young country doctor when she might have married a man that would have set her over a Boston palace — and she'd have been there now! Yet I know she has never regretted it — God bless her!"

"Why, that's just what He has done!" Nancy exclaimed. "Regretted it! Doctor Mark Porter, don't you know my mother is the happiest, luckiest woman in the world? Just as you are the happiest, luckiest man to have her? Why, mamma is thanking God for us both every time she looks at us; we can feel that. If I can stay right here, and keep you two loveliests, do you suppose I'll even know there's a bigger house in the world? Really *know* it, to feel it?"

"Well, Nancy, I suppose I do know that you inherited your mother's blessed blindness before mine came upon me. But it is pleasant to work for one's little daughter, my chicken," the doctor added wistfully.

"I thought we were always to work for one another, in some way," Nancy reminded him. "Didn't

you just agree without saying so, to be my professor? Daddy dear, I want to tell you something. I've been wanting to for several days, but — I haven't! It's about something you were saying to me several weeks ago. Do you remember what you said about my dower?"

"Not exactly. I remember that we were discussing a spiritual dower, weren't we?" the doctor tried to recall the conversation.

"Yes, and heart dowers — though I suppose that is nearly the same," said Nancy. "You told me one's good traits were a dower from ancestors, or else a direct dower from heaven. And that memories of joys, even of sorrows, were the dower of one's life. Now, M. D. — my daddy! — don't you think if you are to depend on me a little bit all the rest of your life, if you aren't going to be quite, not *quite* so able to get on without your Assistant, but that I'm going to be your Assistant really and truly, that it will be my dower? Don't you think that being your eyes, and our being just tied together, my knowing that I can do a wee bit for you, who have done so much, so much, much, *much* for me, will be the most beautiful, wonderful dower a girl could have? It suddenly came to me the other day, daddy dear, that this trouble is going to be my

rich dower, giving me this chance. That you, my own, great, wise, dearest daddy, will be my dower! You always were one, but I mean especially!" Nancy stopped suddenly, embarrassed, and silenced, for her father had leaned toward her with a quick movement and folded her close in his arms, not minding that the tears dropped on her face from his blind eyes, for these were not the tears of mourning over his affliction.

"A dower, my precious! Ah, what a dower I have! How can I regret my other sight when I see my daughter's heart poured out on me!" he cried.

Rick came into the house whistling softly, and paused at the library door.

"Sitting in the firelight?" he asked cheerfully. "Doctor, I stopped in for the last mail, though it rarely brings us anything, and I got two letters, one for you and one for me."

"Did you read either of them, Rick?" asked the doctor.

"Both!" cried Rick with a jolly laugh. It struck Nancy often that Rick laughed more ringingly, whistled more, sang more, was more like other noisy boys since her father's accident than he had ever been before, for Rick was a quiet lad, thoughtful,

sensitive, wrapped up in his books and music, though never unmanly. She guessed that he was making a point of being jolly.

"Maybe I did omit yours, though! But mine is from — whom do you guess?"

"The Italian countess-cousin?" guessed the doctor promptly.

"Somebody told!" cried Rick. "What made you guess right the first time?"

"As though we weren't always expecting something wonderful, romantic from Italy!" cried Nancy. "I'm for ever wondering why it doesn't seem to do you any good to have a cousin with such a — an operatic name as Bianca, Countess of Valtino! What does she say, Rick?"

"She says that she is coming over here this winter," said Rick.

"To Chagford?" cried Nancy.

"To New York, and then she is coming here. She wants me to find a place for her to stay. It seems like a hard thing to do," Rick looked anxiously at Nancy.

"She'll freeze if she comes to the Massachusetts hills out of Italy in winter," commented Nancy.

"Not a bit of it," Doctor Porter reassured her. "And we'll engage rooms for her in the old Chag-

ford inn: it's as comfortable a house as I ever ran across, a great deal more so than lots of the more pretentious modern places. She is coming to rob us of you, Rick boy; I foresee trouble!"

"She isn't an Italian bandit, sir," replied Rick. "I don't believe she belongs to the Black Hand crowd and will kidnap me. And I'm pretty sure nothing but kidnapping would get me away from you and Mrs. Porter — and Nancy," he added, as if it were an afterthought.

"I won't be tacked on precisely as if I were Bumblebee!" declared Nancy. "Shall we read our letter, father?"

"Please, Secretary!" said the doctor.

"It's from Miles Lawrence," announced Nancy. "He asks if he may come here to spend two days. Why, daddy dear! What *do* you suppose — what do you *suppose* he tells you?"

"I've no idea, although Miles was always truthful," said the doctor.

"He says that he is coming to ask Louise, Louise Willis, *our* Louise, you know — to — What do you think?" cried Nancy.

"Marry him," said the doctor with no undue excitement.

"How could you guess that? I never thought

of such a thing! What do you suppose mother will say when she hears it?" Nancy could not take the great news calmly.

"It is more important what Louise will say when she hears it," said the doctor. "I never thought of it either, my dear, but when you get as far as reading that a young man is going to ask such a charming girl as Louise to do something, what else should it be but to marry him?" the doctor asked.

"He says he fell in love with her at our Chagford pageant, three years ago. Isn't that strange?" Nancy went on.

"As good a place as another," remarked the doctor. "I remember that Louise was very pretty that day."

"She's always lovely, and dear, too," said Nancy soberly. "It makes me feel solemn to think of losing her. Yet, of course, Aunt Mary Lawrence's son is almost like my own cousin: she's just the same as mother's real sister would be, so in a way it is keeping Louise. But I never before had any one that was as near and dear to me marry. It really is solemn. And I'm so fond, so specially fond of Louise, it's quite hard. I wonder whether it will be a church wedding and whether Louise will wear white and a veil, or be married at home in a travel-

ling gown and hat? She's so pretty, and her cheeks are so pink that it would be a perfect shame to lose the chance of wearing a wedding veil."

Rick took a header into the couch with a shout of laughter. "I wonder whether Miles will wear a Tuxedo, a clawhammer or a smoking jacket!" he gasped, coming up red and suffused with boyish delight. "If girls aren't funny!"

"Don't you think these details can wait for Louise's decision after she gets her proposal of marriage from Miles?" asked the doctor, joining in Rick's laughter. "Even the most sensible of girls, like my Assistant here, gets sentimentally excited at the most distant whiff of orange blossoms! Bound to see something gently melancholy in the prospect of a happy marriage! Nancy, Nancy, you, too!"

"Well, I don't care!" said Nancy, staunchly. "You may make fun of me if you want to, but I was only wondering! And it *is* solemn to have the first girl you care for go off this way."

"She hasn't gone. You mean the first time a girl you care for marries you feel solemn, don't you? I shall indeed have to give you language lessons, chicken! You'll get used to it by the time you've been bridesmaid to Mimi, Doris, all four

Coggs, Amabel, Cord and watched Louise immolated!" The doctor's chuckle sounded quite like his old self.

"And are carried off yourself," added Rick, flushing.

"That's precisely the same case as yours and the kidnapping," declared Nancy. "I'll never be carried off. Nothing, no one, could make me leave this house and my own Porter lady and gentleman!"

"Nancy, vows at sixteen are modified between twenty and sixty," said the doctor.

"Daddy, I'm a true Mrs. Micawber. I'll never leave you! And I'm just as reliable at sixteen as if I were older!" Nancy said, punishing him with a rapid rumpling of his hair.

"Far more so," declared the doctor. "The real danger is all later."

"I hear mother talking to Letty Hetty. I wonder how she found Mrs. McCutcheon. Mother went down to see what was wrong with nice Mrs. McCutcheon, Rick; she isn't well," Nancy explained.

Mrs. Porter came in, redolent of cold, clean fresh air. "It is going to drop and drop to-night, Mark," she said. "It's getting cold enough to make a

hearth fire most attractive. Why don't you warm youngsters pile on the wood? Mark, Mrs. McCutcheon is feverish and forlorn, dear; has quite a temperature and is in pain. She wanted me to ask you to be sure to come to see her in the morning, if you could. I think you ought, if you feel at all able; they are always so good to us."

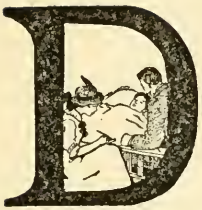
Nancy held her breath, awaiting her father's answer. She and her mother were eagerly hoping that the doctor would consent to try to practise a little, but so far, in the two months since the accident, he had refused to visit a patient.

"Well, if you think she really wants me and it isn't — pity, Mildred? But one of you must go with me," he said slowly.

"Oh, take Nancy; she is your Assistant," said his wife with a light laugh that she managed to make steady. But across his unseeing eyes the mother and daughter clasped hands. For if they could get the doctor to resume the small part of his old life that was now possible to him he would be aroused from the apathy which was his greatest danger.

CHAPTER VI

NANCY TAKES HER TONIC



OCTOR PORTER! Doctor Mark Porter!" called Nancy over the balustrade.

"Miss Porter?" responded the doctor, and Nancy heard him coming along the lower hall, touching the wall at intervals as he came.

"Will you go with me to visit Mrs. McCutcheon — and perhaps for a little, little sleigh ride on this first snow, afterward?" Nancy asked, bending still farther over as if to press her plea.

"So we reverse our position as time goes on!" said the doctor, raising his face toward the sound of her voice. "Now *you* invite *me* to drive with you."

"You see I'm so afraid you won't ask me now that I'm getting an old lady! It was the doctor's *little* girl that you liked to take with you, daddy

mine. You didn't accept the invitation!" Nancy added anxiously.

"I promised your mother to go to Mrs. McCutcheon, and that means both of us, of necessity now, Dame Trot," said the doctor. "Nancy, it must be Tonic!"

"That's nice, father! I can't help feeling that he'll be glad. I'll be right down, in just a wee wink," Nancy's head disappeared and her father heard her light step fly down the hall and into her own room.

When Nancy came down she found her father in his greatcoat and her mother giving him a list for the grocer. Stephen was waiting at the gate with faithful old Tonic, reinstated for his proved trustworthiness when Nancy must be his driver.

"You are to take the right side, Assistant; you must drive me now," said the doctor, helping Nancy into the sleigh.

"It's a drive *together* and that's the main thing," said Nancy, holding back the fur robe as her father followed her.

Stephen looked tragic, but he did not speak as he handed the reins to his beloved old employer's daughter.

"Come, Tonic! Daddy, isn't he an old darling?

He won't start till you give the word! He doesn't think that I am grown up yet to the driving age!" laughed Nancy.

"Come, Tonic," said the doctor, and Tonic at once "came," starting off at his customary unflurried pace. "I am going to let you learn to ride Sanitas, Nancy; he is a saddle horse and perfectly trustworthy, though he is young and lively. I think Tonic is best for our driving. We will go back to our beginnings, daughterlein, driving out together with the old nag, only now you will be the driver."

Nancy turned toward his a face that was so bright with pleasure it was a pity that the doctor could not see it. "I am so glad to hear you say that, daddy dearest; I have missed our drives. But will you really let me ride?" she cried.

"Rick and you," said the doctor nodding. "Rick is to use a horse from the livery, and the Coggs girls and Amabel are to learn also."

"How perfectly scrumptious!" cried Nancy. "Fathery, here we are at Mrs. McCutcheon's. Shall I tie Tonic? Am I to wait here?"

The doctor looked troubled. "I have been thinking about that; I don't believe I can venture in alone. Tie Tonic, yes, dear, and we'll see if you

are in the way within the house. Perhaps the maid will take me to my patient," he said.

Nancy jumped out, tied Tonic to the post, and offered her father her hand to guide him out of the sleigh.

Holding him by the arm, warning him of stray patches of ice on the stone walk, Nancy took her father on his first professional visit since his blindness had fallen upon him.

"Come right up, Doctor Porter, and Nancy, you, too," called Mrs. McCutcheon, when the door was opened. "I thought you'd bring your assistant and I'm glad that you did."

"Is my assistant in the way?" asked the doctor. Mrs. McCutcheon, kind soul, was making all sorts of signals to Nancy which she could not understand, but she guessed that she intended to convey that this was less a necessary summons of her father than a kindly plot to get him out and into his old habits once more.

"No, that she isn't!" said the good woman. "I don't see why you couldn't take Nancy with you on all your visits. I'm sure people would a good deal rather have her to look at their tongues and tell you what she saw, and let you decide whether they were feverish-furry or plain stomach

tongues, than to have anybody but you tinkering at them."

Doctor Porter laughed, and there was more merriment in the laugh than Nancy had heard for some time; her father had been laughing with an effort for weeks past.

Mrs. McCutcheon went on to describe her symptoms; they were not of a nature that required the assistance of Nancy's eyes, there was not any need of deciding whether she had a "feverish-furry" or a "plain stomach" tongue.

"I'm not sure that you require a prescription," said Doctor Porter, when his last question was answered. "I suppose I'd better write one, if only to let you take advantage of your husband's being the druggist and so giving you drugs for love of you. Nancy, take my pencil and prescription pad and write down the mysteries as I give them to you. If Mrs. McCutcheon reads her own prescription in plain English it will never help her."

Nancy did as she was bidden and painstakingly set down the Latin abbreviations as her father dictated them. All the while she was thinking: "Why shouldn't I learn to write prescriptions? Why can't I learn the signs of apothecary's measure, scruples, drachms, ounces and all, and go with father to help

him? Why can't I get him back to practising and be his assistant in truth?"

But all she said aloud was: "Yes, father. 'Fer' and a period. I've got to write ounces, write it out, but that won't matter. Now I'll sign your name. Mark Porter, M. D."

"Give this to your husband, Mrs. McCutcheon, and tell him if it is an unconventional prescription he will still understand it, and I will guarantee your recovery long before spring cleaning time, if he will make it up for you," said the doctor, rising.

"I'm truly obliged to you for coming, Doctor Porter," said his patient. "Somehow, it doesn't matter how well I *know* that Doctor Davidson is a good doctor, I can't *feel* that he can help me with his best skill as you can with —"

"His worst!" cried Nancy, gently pulling her father away from a collision with a chair. "He can't, Mrs. McCutcheon! You know what makes father such a good doctor is because the good doctor is father!"

"Good-bye," cried Doctor Porter. "Come to see me, Mrs. McCutcheon. I need your visit as much as you needed mine. Come with your husband to sit by my fire and smoke — I do not mean that you are to smoke!"

In the sleigh once more Nancy begged for an extension of their drive and her father consented. They turned up the hill toward the lake drive, in the direction of "the stone house" and the Coggs' palace. Over against the winter sky rose the long red roof of the new hospital, for which the Coggs girls had given the land and which had been partly paid for by the pageant which Chagford had held three years ago. The building was nearly finished now; already there were plans afloat for its opening that winter. The hospital had been a cherished project of Doctor Porter's. Nancy guessed that it was an added pang to him that he had been cast out from service to it by his misfortune.

"Does the hospital look well to-day, my bonny?" asked the doctor, breaking a silence in which Nancy had been thinking fast of many half-formed plans, all for her end of drawing her father back into life again.

"Indeed it does, daddy dearest," cried Nancy. "The roof is so cheerful against the white snow that it looks like a hospitable, instead of a hospital! It looks Moorish."

"Nancy, is that slang?" asked the doctor.

"No, it isn't, as you quite well know!" cried Nancy, punishing him with a spat of her gloved

finger on his nose. "Moorish, like the pictures you brought home from Spain, sir. Even the best hospital couldn't look moreish, spelled the other way!"

"I'm not so sure of that. They're as 'eavenly' as Dickens' little Maggie found them to patients in private rooms, without much the matter with them," said the doctor.

"Speaking of my Spanish photographs, Dame Trot, I meant to take you abroad this coming September. I thought that you and I, and maybe a lady we know called Mother Mildred Porter, would be marvellously happy browsing over the Roman forum together, or standing by the Arno waiting for Dante and Beatrice to pass, or alongside the Thames watching the barge bringing Sir Thomas More and his devoted daughter Margaret home from court. But it can never be."

Nancy caught her breath and reddened to her hair with the bliss this suggestion called up and the swift pang that came with her knowledge that she and her father could never live out their dreams of sharing together the sights of the old world. Then she laughed triumphantly, like the brave little comforter that she was.

"Why, you dearest daddy-doctor-goosie!" she

cried, "don't you see that it can be? The only real thing in that little list was the Roman forum; all the rest is our lovely game of Fact and Fiction! We can do it all just as well in one place as another! We'll see Dante and Beatrice right here by the lake just as well as by the Arno, and Sir Thomas More and Margaret Roper are coming to us in my new room; I heard from them and they said so! Father, dear, really don't you see that you and I have brought each other up to live in books and with our most real people — the ones long dead, or who never lived — so perfectly that we don't have to travel? Not even to see?" Nancy added the last words softly, as if she feared them.

"It would have been the finest trip abroad man and maid ever took, my Comfort, for that very reason," said the doctor wistfully. "I should have liked to see your pale little face aflame with joy over some of the pictures and places we have talked of so often. Nancy, do you know that already I am hungry to see your face, here, this moment? It seems long since I have seen it — and your mother's!"

For answer Nancy speechlessly laid that face against the doctor's own. Soft and cold in the tingling wintery air, she rubbed it dumbly against

his cheek. There was nothing to say, for in all the years to come her father would never see her again, but eloquently her silent caress told him that the face was for ever close to him with its eyes glowing with the love he felt, its lips trembling with a breath that was warm from the loving heart of his one child.

"Don't you dare to go by our house!" cried a voice, and Nancy turned to see Hazie Coggs running panting after them. "Tonic may not be a fast trotter, but he's as fast a walker as any horse I ever want to chase!" she gasped, coming up with them. "You've got to stop in to see us for a minute. We've got two things to tell you. Let me stand on your runner the rest of the way."

"Get in, Hazie," said Nancy. "I'll sit on your lap."

"No, not unless you mind my riding this way; do you, doctor? It's the way we used to steal rides when we were little and poor. There wasn't a boy anywhere could beat us double twins catching on. Once in a while it comes over me — all of us — what a big thing it was getting rich and having the fun we do, and then again we think what whole chunks of fun we used to have when we didn't have a red, and then we decide it doesn't make a tu'penny

bit's worth of difference anyhow; we're all right whatever happens," said Hazie, with considerable earnestness.

"That's almost exactly what I was saying to father when you came up," said Nancy demurely, and the doctor laughed.

They turned in at the gate and drove up to the pretentious mansion for whose florid taste — or lack of taste — the Coggs were only responsible inasmuch as buying it counts.

"We Coggs twins are talking about shearing our palace," volunteered Hazie, as they advanced up the really noble avenue of trees by which the approach was made.

"Doing what to it, Hazie?" asked the doctor, doubting that he had heard aright.

"Um-um, yes, sir; shearing it," repeated Hazie. "We asked Miss Drummond, and she knows a lot about architecture. She says we can take off the different kinds of windows, and make 'em all the same sort, and chop off towers, and do several things like that, and make the whole thing toned down so that it will look as if it had good manners. Daisy said: 'Same's you did to us!' when Miss Drummond told us."

"It will be an honour to Chagford if you are as

successful with the house as Miss Drummond has been with its young mistressess," said Doctor Porter, with the manner all Nancy's friends found so delightful, the kindly manner of a fatherly man toward little girls, with a touch of the knightly manner of a good man toward any woman.

"Brought you company, girls!" called Hazie, jumping off the sleigh runner as soon as they came up to the house.

"But not to stay a moment," added the doctor. "We have been borne away by this bandit."

"Oh, let Tonic stand a minute. Here, I'll blanket him!" cried Taizie, and before they had time to know that she had fully gone, she was into the house and out again, bringing a couch cover of the Bagdad type, which she threw over astonished Tonic, making him for the time being giddy with its bright stripes.

"Now, hurry in!" ordered Maizie, pushing the doctor and Nancy affectionately ahead of her. "What do you think is our news?" she cried the instant she had propelled them safely within. "The hospital is to be opened in March or April."

Nancy glanced hastily at her father, but he did not seem disturbed.

"There hasn't been time to notify any one, I

guess," added Maizie, quick to catch that glance and to interpret it. "But the doctors on the board are going to have some ceremonies. The reason I know is that Miss Belinda was there this morning and the Board was sitting; she stopped here on her way back and told us. And there's going to be some sort of a big jamboree for the rest of us, all the young people in town, more or less. They don't know what it's to be yet, but it'll be, all right. I guess it'll be a dramatic affair, or something — anyway it's sure to be fine and dandy. And you are sure to be asked to take a big part, Nancy Porter, because — you are! Then our other news is that — What would you say if we changed our name?"

"Married?" cried Nancy, her mind flying back to Miles Lawrence's proposed visit to win Louise Willis. If one girl of her older girl friends was in immediate danger of being engaged, why not all the others?

Maizie threw back her head and laughed, in which the other three members of the Coggs quartette joined.

"What, the whole bunch of us at once?" cried Daisy. "Well, Nancy, what's the matter with you? Guess again."

"I can't," said Nancy.

"Change our last name, take a new one," explained Maizie. "Our lawyer advised us to. He said Coggs was too ugly, and that the plural was sure to get to be Coggses, and the — the —" Maizie looked toward Miss Drummond.

"The possessive," suggested Miss Drummond.

"Yes, the possessive was awkward, and altogether he advised us to slip our Coggs. What would you say?" Maizie inquired. "You, Doctor Porter, first."

"Coggs isn't a pretty name," said the doctor. "But a great many names are not pretty. I think I should feel toward it as Touchstone felt about Audrey, with the difference in terms required by the difference in cases: 'It is a poor thing, but it is mine own.'"

"I should feel," said Nancy, as the Coggs girls all nodded agreement to Doctor Porter's words, "I would feel that it was a little mean, not quite — like the Coggs girls, to drop their name for something prettier."

"We knew you'd say that!" cried the quartette triumphantly. "That's the same thing as we said, only put differently," added Maizie. "We said Coggs we were and Coggs we had to be, or sneak.

"And then we'd never agree upon a name in its place. Daisy thought Hamilton would be nice; Hazie was voting for FitzEustace; Taizie said she'd always been stuck on the name of Lee, and I like Davenport real well — only it sounds like a folding-bed! Well, either that or Stuart. So we're going to stay Coggs."

"I say stay Coggs until we get a chance to change it in the natural way," added Daisy, significantly humming the Bridal Chorus from Lohengrin.

"Is this all that we were to be told?" asked the doctor. "Because we really must go home; this is our first drive with Nancy in my place as charioteer."

"It wasn't so much that our news couldn't wait to be told as it was that we always want to get you and Nancy in here whenever we can," said Hazie.

She happened to be standing near the doctor as she spoke and he reached out and tweaked her ear. "Put not your trust in women! So we are told by wisdom, not even when the woman is a twin girl of seventeen! You shall never ride on my runner again, miss. Not that your items have not been most interesting."

CHAPTER VII

THE LADY - IN - WAITING TO PRINCE CUPID

'LL do the trimming, motherums," Nancy called to her mother across the hall. "I'd like to."

She hurried from her room into the guest-room, bright with winter sunshine, where Mrs. Porter was busily laying out bureau, table and stand linens from a drawer that held the articles set aside for use in that room.

"I like better than almost anything to put its fresh linen garments on a room," said Nancy. "So if there's anything else you want to do, run away and do that, Mrs. Porter, ma'm."

"I'd like to sit in that rocking-chair in the sunshine and watch you work, Miss Porter," replied Nancy's mother. "I'm just a wee bit tired, enough so to enjoy seeing another finish my task." She dropped into the low green willow chair as she

"SHE DROPPED INTO THE LOW GREEN WILLOW CHAIR."

spoke and luxuriously settled herself with the silken down pillow crushed into the hollow of her shoulders.

"Here goes then!" laughed Nancy, rapidly depositing on the bed the articles that belonged on the bureau and unrolling the fine white linen scarf from its roller, then spreading it across the polished mahogany with keen enjoyment of the contrast.

"Miles will be here on the one forty-eight, won't he, mother?" asked Nancy. "It's really the most exciting thing!"

"Would it be less so if he came at night?" laughed Mrs. Porter. "He said the one forty-eight; you've asked that several times, Nancy."

"I suppose I have," admitted Nancy. "But it is only this afternoon; the time is getting short! Mother, it doesn't seem as if it were Miles who was coming; it seems as though it were some interesting stranger. When I think that this very afternoon Louise Willis will have some one ask her to marry him it doesn't seem as though it could be Louise or Miles, whom we know so well, but people in a story."

"Nancy, you veritable little goose!" cried Mrs. Porter.

"It's very exciting," persisted Nancy, with a

laugh at herself. "I do hope Louise will say yes! Though I shall dread her going away. I never said so, but there were two years when I used to try to copy Louise in every single thing; I fell in love with her before Miles did!"

"I know, dear, and I was glad it was such a sweet girl whom you admired. You are just as fond of her now, but one sign of your growing older is that you have stopped trying to imitate her; you are more nearly friends on an equal footing," said Mrs. Porter.

"Equal! No, indeed, motherly! I may be sixteen in spots, but I'm six in other spots, and no where near equal to a girl of twenty-one whom Miles Lawrence is coming from Boston to steal from us," cried Nancy. "Does that look all right?" she added, stooping to scan the two ends of the bureau cover to make sure that they were of even lengths.

"Mother, do you think I ought to bring my scarlet geranium in here — as a sort of flag for Miles if he comes back triumphant? I might get Rick to come with his violin and play Mendelssohn's Consolation if she refuses him!" Nancy chuckled over her own nonsense. "Speaking of consolation, motherlings, I'm going to try to get the hospital

committee to let Rick and me give a scene from Shakespeare for the night of the opening."

"Why, Nancy, how unlike you! Why do you want to do that, dear?" cried Mrs. Porter.

Nancy never could overcome her natural timidity when she had to raise her voice before many people, so this announcement was surprising.

"To let father train us," said Nancy promptly. "Don't you think he would love it? I know he would. He always loved to teach me to recite Shakespeare from the time I was the tiniest thing, you know. Why, on our drives we used to recite to each other, whole scenes, often. I thought it would interest him to drill Rick and me, and daddy dearest has to be interested in everything we can think of. If you don't think he'd enjoy it I'm sure I'd be glad enough not to act, for I'll never in this world have the kind of knees that don't partly fold up and partly get stiff, and the kind of voice that doesn't turn into a whisper when I appear in public."

"Good little daughter!" said Mrs. Porter affectionately. "I know that your father would enjoy it, and perhaps your knees and voice will be strengthened by your unselfish motive this time. How will you bring about the opportunity?"

"Miss Belinda," said Nancy promptly. "They're sure to give the programme mainly into her hands. I'm full of schemes, mater mia. I don't know just what will come of them, but I don't mean them to be failures, not all of them. And I don't want you to know what they are, so you can truthfully say you are not responsible if they go wrong."

"I'll trust you, daughter," said Mrs. Porter. "We must go down-stairs now, or I must. The room is perfect. If it weren't Miles wouldn't know it, for he will have the most engrossing preoccupation of mind added to his young man's blindness as to details."

"I suppose that's so," said Nancy, putting an arm around her mother as they went toward the door, and looking back regretfully upon the room that would bear recognition of its pleasant orderliness. "Dear me, of course I'll never marry and leave you two best beloveds, wouldn't want to, but it must be nice to have some one's brain so full of you that he can't even see the best bureau scarf where he's visiting."

Mrs. Porter's laugh rang out so sincerely at this remark that the doctor, sitting alone in the library, smiled in sympathy.

"That sounded pleasant, Mildred," he said as

the mother and daughter came in. "May I share the fun?"

"Nancy is inclined to be mournful that her destiny of being only our Nancy all her life will keep her from tasting Louise's wonderful experience, having some one's admiration," laughed Mrs. Porter.

"No one will ever love Louise better than an old doctor loves you, Ladybird, nor admire her more," said the doctor, putting out his hand. In response to this invitation Nancy came and perched upon his knee, at once touzling his hair in her favourite manner.

"I know that and I don't want any one to," she said. "But — it is interesting! I'm quite a great deal interested in Miles' coming."

"Surely! Quite right you are to be interested. I am interested myself, wildly," declared the doctor.

"We read about the prince and Cinderella, and other stories, but this seems to take a story right out of a book and set it down in this house. It brings it so near," said Nancy, surprised to feel shy for the first time in all her life with her intimate father-comrade.

"It makes you a Lady-in-Waiting in the court of Prince Cupid, doesn't it, Nancy?" asked the

doctor with a smile, wondering inwardly what would at last befall this precious young creature who was now fast growing womanly, yet was still his unchanged little girl at heart.

"Are you sending Stephen to meet Miles?" asked Mrs. Porter.

"Yes. And this afternoon I'm going to lend Miles the sleigh and Sanitas. I think he'll like to drive Louise around the lake road. He doesn't know it, but I shall tell him that all happy marriages in Chagford are arranged on a drive around the lake," said the doctor.

"I suppose I must put on an afternoon gown," said Nancy. "Though Miles will never see little Nancy, of course! Daddy dearest, you look like a whole nest of fretful porcupines! I never touzled you so beautifully! I believe you will have to let me untouzle you. Come to your room, sir, and I'll polish you with your military brushes till Miles will think your dear gray head is a smooth marble bust!"

The doctor arose obediently and went with Nancy, her hand in his arm, partly in caress, partly to guide him.

Mrs. Porter watched them away, tears in her eyes, a smile on her lips. Putting up her hand to dry the

tears, she turned and saw Letty Hetty in the doorway.

"It just seems 'sif I couldn't stand it to have it so," Letty Hetty said with a choke. "And yet it makes me gladder than anything. It's awful and beautiful, and tearful and thankful-cause, all at once. Mrs. Porter, the chicken that butcher's sent is about the youngest thing I ever met outside a cradle. It ain't big enough for dinner, unless Miles Lawrence's lost his appetite through bein' in love. It was a shame to cut off his head when he didn't weigh more'n two and a quarter pounds, dressed. I was wonderin' if it wouldn't do for me to make some croquettes of the cold veal, and get something else for supper? They sent that poor innocent chicken here too late to supplement him with something else from the shop for dinner."

Mrs. Porter laughed, thankful that the deepest things in life are so mercifully mingled with its funny trifles.

"Surely, Letty Hetty; croquettes are always in order, and Nancy and I will avoid the tiny chicken," she said. "I must make myself ready to play hostess; I see Stephen is starting to the station."

Stephen brought Miles Lawrence safely from the station less than an hour later. He was a tall, stal-

wart young man, full of robust health and keen common sense. Nancy saw at a glance that he was not in the least the lover of Shakespeare's "Seven Ages," which her father had long ago taught her, "sighing like a furnace." She was instantly glad that she had put on her becoming Copenhagen blue house gown, for she saw that Miles looked at her appraisingly to see how the little girl was growing into a big one, and she was anxious to stand well in the opinion of this so-called cousin whom she rarely saw.

The look in Miles' eyes as he clasped the doctor's proffered hand was so full of affection, respect and pity that Nancy suddenly found herself afraid that Louise might not reward him, and all trace of her half regret at losing Louise was swallowed up in that feeling. Any one who loved her father and wanted to help him now was entitled to the best in the world, Nancy thought.

Miles betrayed an excellent appetite at dinner, so that Letty Hetty's croquettes were quite necessary. The diminutive chicken was explained by Mrs. Porter and they made merry over what the doctor pretended was really his wife's niggardly providing.

At coffee Miles offered the doctor his cigar case with a smile for Mrs. Porter and Nancy.

"One of the things I early admired in Aunt Mildred was her indifference to tobacco fumes in her curtains," he said. "May we smoke at the table as of old, big and little lady?"

"The doctor does when there is any one to join him, Miles, but ordinarily we go into the library to smoke and sew and talk and have a little music," said Mrs. Porter.

"Rick does the music?" asked Miles.

"Rick and Nancy," said the doctor. "Nancy isn't going to make a world record as a pianist, but she plays pretty well now. You see Miss Belinda Allaire is an extraordinary musician, and Nancy is quick to feel, so she plays rather better than the average girl of sixteen."

"So she is sixteen!" said Miles thoughtfully. "Not much longer to be the doctor's little girl, Nancy, if you are that now!"

"She's the light of my eyes, literally now, Miles boy; she was always that in the other sense," said the doctor, before Nancy could reply. "We can have some music to-night — if you've nowhere else to go?"

Miles laughed. "I've come on an errand, Uncle Mark," he said.

"Go do your errand, boy," said the doctor.

"We'll speed you. Don't waste time smoking with an old fellow like me. I'm going to let you have the sleigh and my new horse. He's young, faster than old Tonic. You're to drive around the lake road; that's the orthodox way to find the road to happiness in Chagford."

"All right, sir," said Miles, rising, plainly glad to get his release. "Thank you very much. I'll just run up-stairs and get on another — "

"Tie!" cried Rick, with a shout of laughter. "I've been wondering if you wouldn't."

"Rick, as sure as guns you're no longer a small boy!" cried Miles. "I recognize you as a man and a brother by that remark."

When Miles came down Nancy went into the hall to see him off, for one of her father's old patients had come to consult him and her mother had stayed at hand in case her husband needed her.

Miles slowly drew on his heavy driving gloves while Nancy watched him; plainly he was nervous.

"I've brought you that tiny chicken's wishbone for luck," she said, offering it to him.

"Thank you, little coz! Nancy, you are growing to be a nice girl; I've been watching you," said Miles, buttoning the talisman under his coat.

"I've always tried to imitate Louise Willis," said

Nancy, with a sort of shy inspiration. "I fell in love with her, the way little girls do with big ones, three years ago, and I tried to be like her."

"You dear little thing!" cried Miles. "That's what I call tact, Nancy! You'll be your mother's daughter. Wish me luck, Nancy! I see you fell in love with Louise before I did."

"Yes. But I do wish you luck. I wished it weakly before you came, but now I wish it strongly because I've been watching how much you care — about my father," said Nancy.

"Care! My dear, who wouldn't? Big, splendid, wise Uncle Mark! Nancy, I'd do 'most anything to give him back his sight," cried Miles.

"Yes," said Nancy sadly. Then she smiled. "Good-bye, Miles. Good luck!"

"Good-bye, little Nan. Thank you, dear!" And Miles stooped to kiss Nancy's cheek and was gone.

Nancy came back to the library; her father was not there. She went into her own new room and dropped down on the couch, resting her face on her hands, folded with the palms laid together. It was still; the winter sunshine poured in at the south window, sinking westward, for it was getting toward three in the afternoon and the sun's rays were sinking level with the window.

There was a great deal to think of, and Nancy fell into thinking of it. She was engrossed in her thoughts and plans so that she did not hear Rick come into the room, and it startled her when he seated himself on the couch at the lower end and brushed against her swinging foot.

"Oh, Rick!" she cried.

"What are you thinking about, Nancy?" asked Rick. "Sorry to have Louise snapped up?"

"No, not now; only afraid she won't snap Miles up! He's a nice boy, Richie," said Nancy.

"True, grandma," agreed Rick. "I guess it'll be all right; she let him come here. Nancy, I've been wanting to tell you, but I was thinking it over. You know my Italian cousin is coming to America and to Chagford this winter. Well," he went on, as Nancy nodded, with a startled look dawning in her eyes as she wondered to what this might be a prelude, "she wants to take me in hand and give me a thorough musical education."

"Oh, Rick! That was always your dream! It would take you away! But you are a musician, every inch of you. You must let her!" cried Nancy, in a rapid succession of sentences, sitting erect as the full meaning of this offer unfolded before her mind.

"Do you think I could not be any good as anything else?" asked Rick.

"Why, no; I don't mean that," said Nancy. "But you love music — that isn't it either! You *are* music. You are so full of it that it is yourself. I don't know how to say it, but I know what I mean. I love music, Miss Belinda is a fine musician, but that isn't your way of being one. You and music are in and out of each other, so that you are your love of music. There! That sounds rather crazy, but that's it! Of course you are fine in your studies, and you are perfectly sensible and reliable, not in the least topsyturvy-minded like the musicians one hears of, but I'm afraid you ought to be a musician, Richie."

"I wanted to ask you," said Rick slowly. "You don't think I could be made into a good doctor, do you?"

"Do you want to be one?" cried Nancy, more and more surprised. "Your long violin-playing fingers would be fine for a doctor to have. Why, yes, Rick, I think you could be a good doctor, a fine doctor! You are so quick to see what ails people, and so kind, so very kind and gentle! But — do you want to be a doctor, Rick?" asked Nancy again.

"Nancy, don't you ever in all this world give me away!" said Rick, suddenly speaking fast and turning crimson. "I wouldn't tell you, but I think you'll be able to say whether I am right or wrong better than any grown person I know, better, even, then your mother. Because you know me better than any one else can, and you know — all the rest of it. I'd like to be a musician, and that's the truth. I always hoped to be one. But whatever I did I'd never give up my music. I pretty nearly worship your father; you know that, and you know what he's done for me. Now, if I studied medicine, if I studied *with* him, don't you see, wouldn't it give him something to fill up part of his thoughts? And, if I got through well and could settle down here with him, wouldn't it sort of be like his keeping on himself? Because he made me what I was, and I'd be right with him, like a — Well, just as if it were you."

Nancy sprang to her feet with an inarticulate cry and threw herself on Rick's shoulder, sobbing as he had never seen Nancy sob.

"Oh, Rick! Oh, dear, dear, dear Richie! You'd give up your music, you'd give up all else for my father! Oh, I'll never, never forget this as long as I live! I can't tell this minute whether you ought

to do this or not, but I'll never forget it! I love you, Rick, dearly, dearly! You good, good, dear Rick!"

"Now don't you love me because you're grateful to me, Nancy Porter!" cried Rick. "And don't make so much of it, anyway! Because it wouldn't be giving up everything to stay here. I'd want to be a famous musician only to come back here and tell you that I was one — you and your mother and father, you know. So don't make a fuss, Nancy. Why, Nancy, do you suppose I wouldn't be happy if this worked out?"

Nancy straightened herself and wiped her eyes. "It's glorious, Rick, and there's no use in your trying to make little of it," she said. "You would be like father's son, like my own, own brother, even more than now."

Rick looked at her, and, if there had been any one to see it, the look would have shown that Rick was older than Nancy at the same age.

"I'd like to be a son to your father, Nancy," he said. "It wouldn't be good in me to be that to him, if I had the chance."

CHAPTER VIII

COMING EVENTS

ILES LAWRENCE did not return to take tea with the Porters.

"This does not mean that Sanitas has changed his name to Satanas, and run away, Assistant; it means that Miles is happily supping with his future relatives and his bride-elect," said the doctor, when Nancy expressed a little uneasiness as to Miles.

After supper the doctor and his wife betook themselves to Nancy's new room, as was their custom now. The piano had been moved there, to be ready when Nancy's young friends came to see her, and nearly every evening she and Rick played to their elders. The doctor made himself comfortable on the couch, his wife, busy with sewing, sat in front of the fireplace, near him, and Nancy took the piano bench with Rick at her right hand, violin on shoulder.

Every night the small audience of two — though it was not unusual to have it increased by some of the closest of the old Chagford friends — listened to music that did not demand of its hearers leniency of judgment. Nancy played well, her touch was exquisite, her intelligence and feeling keen, her fingers as flexible, yet strong as a good pianist's should be. But Rick, Rick was a genius! The lad played the violin as if he were inspired, brilliantly, movingly, with intensity that never ceased to be good art, nor degenerated into sentimentality. There were few so privileged as the Porters in the music that arose beside their hearth.

That night Nancy and Rick played wonderfully. They were moved by the possession of their secret; they had agreed not to speak of Rick's suggestion for the future till later. Rick's cousin, the Countess Valtino, would be in Chagford by and by. She was not near enough of kin, nor had known Rick to have authority over him, but it seemed right to consult her, for she was his only living relative. It was too soon in any case to decide so momentous a question. But the proposal nestled warm in Nancy's heart, making her love for Rick glow at one with her love for her father and her passionate desire to help him. The secret shared got into their music, and Nancy

and Rick played their sympathy and joy in it to the doctor and his wife, who could not interpret it, but who knew that their children were surpassing themselves that night.

It was still early when Miles came back; they heard the chime of his sleighbells as he drove up, and Nancy and Rick burned to fly out to hear how he had fared.

"We couldn't ask, but, Rick, let's go and peep at him! We can tell when we see him!" cried Nancy, dropping her hands on the keys with a crash that sounded as though Bumblebee were taking one of her promenades on them.

She and Rick came back jubilant. "He gave Stephen a dollar, or at least a bank note, when he took the horse, so it must be all right," laughed Rick, knowing that joy makes generosity.

"And he was beaming," added Nancy. "We must be playing when Miles comes in here, Rick; it might embarrass him if we were all just sitting down waiting to hear if he was engaged."

"Pretty much what we are doing, Nancy, but we'll do it to music if you think it'll spare Miles' blushes," said Rick, catching up his violin and dashing into an old French dance, so lively that Nancy, instead of attempting to fall into its piano

accompaniment, accompanied it with an improvised dance, swinging her skirts in both hands and pirouetting gaily.

"Well, well!" cried Miles from the doorway, coming unheard. "What a picture that would be for Margaret Dicksee to paint; in costume, you know! Don't stop, Nancy; that's the way I feel."

"Congratulations, Miles boy?" asked the doctor rising.

"Yes, sir, and good ground for them, Uncle Mark!" cried Miles triumphantly, giving both his hands into the doctor's hearty grasp.

"Indeed there is, Miles! Louise is a dear girl," said Mrs. Porter. She put an arm up over the tall young man's shoulder and kissed him heartily. "That's for your mother till she can do it herself," she said. "I'm so glad Mary's son is going to give her so lovely a daughter."

"I always said you were the nicest people in the world!" cried Miles, as if this settled it. "Mother'll do her own kissing when I get back to-morrow, I promise you."

"Are you going to-morrow, Miles?" asked the doctor. "Did you tell Stephen?"

"Got to go, Uncle Mark, sorry enough to say so," returned Miles. "But it's no time to neglect

duty when you're newly engaged. I'm going on that 8.03 in the morning. No, sir, I didn't tell Stephen, because — Well, you see I'm not going to drive to the station. I'm going to call for Louise and she'll walk with me to see me off."

"Quite right; of course she will," approved the doctor. "And when are you coming up to stay with us again?"

"Well, I may be up on Saturday, but I'm going to the Willis'. Mrs. Willis kindly said she'd take me in," said Miles.

"So we lose the visitor that has been ours since he was in socks!" exclaimed the doctor. "But I'll bear no one ill will for the robbery, Miles. By and by perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Miles Lawrence will visit us."

"And Nancy will come to stay long weeks at a time with Mr. and Mrs. Miles Lawrence!" cried Miles. "Nancy, your wishbone worked its spell."

"W-i-s-h-b-o-n-e, is that its spell?" cried Nancy. Miles thought he had never seen her so mischievous and gay; she was usually rather a demure Miss Nancy.

"Rick and I have a serenade for you." She flew to the piano, Rick took up his violin, and they played a ridiculous medley which they had prac-

tised industriously; a few bars of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," alternated with a few bars of the Lohengrin "Bridal Chorus."

"Can't scare me that way!" cried Miles, as the absurdity ended with a great finale in which Rick played one and Nancy the other wedding music at the same time.

The Porter household was astir early the following morning, Miles was breakfasted and started on his way by seven, although he had protested that he wanted nothing to eat and would not trouble any one, if they would be satisfied to let him depart breakfastless.

"Food, Mr. Miles, never hurt any one," replied Letty Hetty, who was most affected by this disarrangement of family hours. "Bliss may be fillin', but if you lived on it too long Louise might be a widow before she wanted to be."

Before the Porters had settled down to the routine of the day after Miles had gone, Louise herself came in. She was prétty, rosy and cold from her walk to the station and back, and, after Mrs. Porter had kissed her and Nancy had hugged her breathless, she drew a low chair before the fire, from which she sprang up to greet the doctor just entering, and receive his good wishes. Then she settled

down for a talk, with Nancy on the rug at her feet, looking at her admiringly and curiously, for this was not merely dear Louise, it was a newly betrothed maiden, and Nancy's sixteeen years were alert with wonder as to how she looked and felt.

Louise's furs fell to the floor without her noticing them, as she stretched her hands to the fire.

"Oh, Louise!" cried Nancy. A beautiful white diamond caught the flame light and scintillated like a bit of fairyland. "Did Miles bring it with him?"

"Yes. He said that he brought it in case anything happened, but that he had prudently arranged to return it if nothing did happen!" laughed Louise. "Isn't it the most beautiful stone? And just the right size exactly!"

"It's perfectly beautiful!" sighed Nancy, with such fervour that the words sounded like a freshly coined phrase. "The ring is as nice as you and Miles are; that's saying a good deal for it, Louise. Just think, you'll be married by the time you're twenty-five, maybe before!"

"Twenty-five! Four years hence! Why, Nancy, I shall be married at Easter," cried Louise.

"At Easter! This coming Easter! Louise!" cried Nancy in a shocked tone. "Why, Louise!

There isn't time. And you never seemed much older than Amabel and me; not much older. This is only January."

"It is unexpected, Louise," said Mrs. Porter, as Louise turned toward her.

"Miles seems to think that there's nothing to wait for," laughed Louise. "I couldn't think of anything, either, when I tried to. I shall have Althea Lawrence for maid of honour when I'm married, but Amabel is to be bridesmaid, and so are you, Nancy, my pet."

"Are you actually planning the wedding?" cried Nancy. "And yesterday at this time you didn't know there was to be one!"

"Didn't I?" said Louise. "Well, Miles had written to ask if he might come up to see me, and — I'm not planning the wedding further than to know that I want my Nancy as a bridesmaid."

Doctor Porter laughed. "You see, my little girl, coming events cast their shadows before young women. Though no nice girl will admit it, any more than the coon will admit to seeing his shadow on a cloudy Candlemas day! I approve the Easter wedding, Louise. And don't let them whisk you into a confusion of hurrying over a trousseau. Get your wedding gown, and a travelling gown, and a

gown to wear when you first get home, and let the rest go. It makes me wrathy to have the golden days of romance made all prickly with dressmaker's pins."

Louise arose to go. "You're such a dear man, Doctor Porter!" she said. "I'm going to slip through the fussy side as easily as I can. You know mamma and Amabel are fond of magnificence and are mortally afraid of Mrs. Grundy. But I don't care one bit for that severe person, nor for fuss and feathers. I often wonder if I don't owe a good deal of my simple taste to the hours I used to spend here when I was small, and Nancy was a tiny thing? When you used to show me your photographs and teach me to love books and pictures? It was my delight to run away to the Porter house, and I think I absorbed enough of its standards never to care for any others."

"You were always our little Louise, that's quite sure," said Mrs. Porter. "I'd like to think that we had helped to make you into the girl that will be the joy and blessing of Mary Lawrence's life. For Miles' mother is as dear to me as the dearest sister could be. I foresee I shall have to be your Aunt Mildred, now, Louise, as I am Miles'. And the doctor will be your Uncle Mark, also."

"Isn't that happy?" cried Louise. "Cousin Nancy, are you going out? And will you walk with me?" she added, for Nancy was getting on her arctics.

"Please, Cousin Louise," said Nancy, "I have a great deal on my mind and I was going out to get some of it off my mind."

"Let it blow away?" suggested the doctor.

"No, transfer it," said Nancy. "Daddy dearest, I couldn't work on my Latin last night; there was too much going on —"

"Amo, amas, amavit," murmured the doctor.

"That's it!" cried Nancy. "But I'll be back in time to get it ready for this afternoon, if you'll be ready to teach me. And don't get lonely while I'm out."

"This conceited young person thinks she's indispensable!" exclaimed the doctor.

"I have an engagement for this morning to listen to a reading by a lady whom I've known and loved longer than I have you, Miss Porter. A lady who, when she was Mildred Chandler, made me as happy as Louise is making Miles now. And that happiness was so lasting that I've faith to believe Louise and Miles also will be happy to the end."

Louise put her hand lovingly on this old friend's

shoulder, then, because he was blind, yet saw so much, she raised her sweet face and kissed him.

"You've been almost like a father to me, Doctor, and I love you dearly," she said. "As I have no father I want you to take his place and give me away when I am married."

"Well, Louise child, we'll see, we'll see! I think you can persuade me," said the doctor.

"What have you on your mind, Nancy?" asked Louise, as they walked down the street. "Or was that nonsense?"

"Indeed, it's sober earnest, Louise," replied Nancy. "I've been thinking all day, and lying awake after I go to bed — a while anyway — for days past, trying to plan."

"Plan, dear?" questioned Louise.

"Louise," said Nancy, energetically, "there must be some way found to keep father in the world of work. Mrs. McCutcheon sent for him the other day, and I'm sure it was because her husband had told her how pale and quiet father was. It did do him good to make a visit, but that shows he ought to go about practising regularly. Louise, do you think I could help? I've gone to work hard on Latin and Greek — dear daddy loves Greek so! And at — oh, lots of studies. I thought he'd be interested in helping me,

and he is. Do you suppose people would send for him if I went with him and saw for him? If I learned to write prescriptions? He could dictate the abbreviations, but I'd have to learn the signs. If I thought his old patients would not mind, I'd go to Doctor Davidson and get him to teach me, or Mr. McCutcheon, and surprise daddy. People are kind, but you know they get used to things. By and by everybody will take it for granted that poor daddy has dropped out, and it will be too late to help it. And while everybody else gets used to it his blindness will grow harder and harder to him. I think I'm the only one that can do anything to keep him practising — if I can! Then by and by maybe — " Nancy stopped short. What she was thinking was that maybe, by and by, Rick would be ready to take her father's practice and the old doctor would willingly slip out to make room for the young one. But that was a dream of a still distant future; the present was all that Nancy had to straighten.

"Nancy, you dear little girl!" said Louise. "You dear big girl, for you are only five years younger than I, but you always seem to us little Nancy Porter! You know that there are many, many people in Chagford who would rather have your father come into their sick room than any other

person in the world. He's been not only their physician but their kind, true friend for so long. But they are not sure that he would care to come now, and, to be quite honest, they do not feel sure that it is possible to consult a blind man. If you could take him to them, help him a little, I'm sure he would have many patients. And, if it was necessary, Doctor Davidson could work with him — if he would! I don't know Doctor Davidson well."

"People say that he loves money," said Nancy. "If he does he might rather dearest daddy dropped out. But I don't believe any one could be so cruel! For, of course, it isn't the money that I'm thinking about. Do you suppose I could go to see Doctor Davidson?"

Louise hesitated, then made up her mind. "I'm sure that you may, Nancy," she said. "Go and tell him what you have told me, ask him if it is possible to keep your father in some degree, Chagford's dear old doctor, as he always was, with you still his Assistant. I'm sure he will help you, Nancy; how could he not?"

"Then I'll go to-morrow!" declared Nancy. "I'm going now to ask Mimi to go with me. I'm afraid to go alone. She can wait in the next room, but I'd like to know she was there. Thank you ever

so much, Louise. I couldn't ask mother, and I didn't want to tell Rick what I was planning. I did think of talking to Letty Hetty, but she didn't seem the right one, either. And I'm going to get Miss Belinda to let me do something from Shakespeare, with Rick, for the hospital opening, so father can train us, though I'd as lief be punished on a ducking stool in the lake!"

"They say they used to have a ducking stool for scolds in that lake, though it was a pond then, when Chagford was young," laughed Louise.

"Here I am at home. Will you come in and see Amabel, Nancy?"

Nancy shook her head. "I must hunt up Mimi; I'd rather get her to help with Doctor Davidson than Amabel. Amabel is so grown up, Louise! She is much more grown up than you are!" Nancy said with a laugh.

"Amabel takes herself seriously," admitted Louise. "But she is fond of Nancy!"

"So is Nancy of her," echoed Nancy. "Good-bye, Louise, you dear thing! I'm as glad as I can be you're going to marry Miles Lawrence."

"What relation shall I be to you then?" asked Louise, her hand on the gate.

"Miles is no relation at all, only a called-cousin,

so you will be no-relation-at-all-in-law, my called-cousin-in-law!" cried Nancy, and ran off with her soft low laugh, waving a hand back to Louise as she ran.

CHAPTER IX

NANCY DARES

IMI HUNT welcomed Nancy with her usual enthusiasm when they met.

"Amabel Willis has just gone. She came to tell me," said Mimi. "I suppose you weren't surprised, but I was."

"Surprised?" echoed Nancy. "Oh! No, we weren't surprised. We're as glad as can be, though. But I didn't come to tell you about Louise and Miles. I came to get you to go with me to see Doctor Davidson to-morrow."

"Are you sick, Nancy?" cried Mimi anxiously. "Your own father is just as well able to prescribe for you as ever he was. I'd rather have Doctor Porter than Doctor Davidson if he was crippled as well as blind."

"So would I; that's really why I am going to

see Doctor Davidson. I'm not sick, Mimi. I want to ask Doctor Davidson to help daddy dear to practise — or help me to help him," explained Nancy.

"Why, Nancy! Why, Nancy Porter!" cried Mimi.

"Just that, and because I'm Nancy Porter," said Nancy. "It's not because father wants fees; you know that without my saying so. But he's growing so still, so white, so fearfully patient that he's got to have something that keeps him part of the world. I see mother watching him and looking so anxious and sorrowful that I can't stand it. He's interested in my studies, but that isn't enough. Father is first of all a physician. I'm going to ask Doctor Davidson to tell me if there's any reason why he can't practise, and then if he'll show me some things so I can be eyes for him. Then I'll get you and Doris and Amabel and Louise, but especially older people, to let it be known that they can send for Doctor Porter if they want him. And if he found it was a case that needed eyes father would make them send for Doctor Davidson."

"Oh, Nancy, he won't do it; he'll never do it!" sighed Mimi. "Don't you know about the hospital?"

"That it's to be opened by spring? What then?

No, I don't know," added Nancy, as Mimi shook her head.

" They were going to make your father the chief physician there," said Mimi reluctantly. " But now they are saying that he is not able to take charge, that Doctor Davidson must be at the head of it. They say that Doctor Davidson is trying to be chosen, that he praises your father everywhere and says that he is terribly sorry for him, but that no blind man can be at the head of a hospital. So you see, Nancy, there isn't a bit of hope that he will help you get your father back into his old practice, for that would show that Doctor Davidson was wrong and that your father was fit to take charge there."

Nancy's face had lengthened, her eyes filled with tears as she listened to Mimi. Her hands fluttered in and out of each other nervously, almost prayerfully.

" Oh, Mimi, you don't think any one could be selfish about father when he has always been so splendid all his life, never caring one speck for money, helping everybody, not sending out half the bills due him! You don't think any one could be selfish toward him now that he is stricken?" she cried.

Mimi and Doris had always agreed that Nancy was far more clever than either of them, but that when it came to plain sense they often saw things clearer than she did. For Nancy had lived in an atmosphere so filled with unworldliness and other-worldliness, she had been so nourished on the best in literature, poetry and the ideal that she believed every goose in the world to be a swan, however loudly it hissed, and she never expected people to be swayed by other motives than the highest. So she was sometimes wofully disappointed and astonished by the failure of ordinary mortals to be as chivalric as the knights in the Morte d'Arthur, or as lovely ladies as Sir Walter Scott drew, or as Dorothea Brooks in Middlemarch — or as her own perfect example, her mother. It was this quality of imaginative childhood that made the doctor and Mrs. Porter fearful of what life might mean to their Nancy if she fell into hands unworthy of her.

Now Mimi looked at her pityingly and hesitated before she finally said: "Well, you know, Nancy, lots of people take about all that they can get in this world."

"Oh, what shall I do?" cried Nancy in distress. "But that wouldn't be people in Chagford, another physician who has seen the way father has prac-

tised here and that he is blind — oh, my good, good, dearest daddy! Mimi, I don't believe Doctor Davidson will be mean about it; I know he won't, he can't! Anyway I must go to ask him. Would you mind going with me?"

Mimi minded very much, but she only asked: "What would you want me to do? When were you going?"

"To-morrow morning. You wouldn't have anything to do but sit in the next room, if you'd rather, and — be there," said Nancy.

"In case Doctor Davidson amputated you somewhere?" suggested Mimi. "All right; I'll go. Nobody shall ever say I didn't stand by you, Nancy, whatever you do, for ever."

"They never could," Nancy assured her as she rose. "You're quite as faithful as Old Dog Tray, and I'll 'never, never find a better friend' than you are. Thank you, you dear thing! I'm not going to worry. I always have believed that when you are trying to do your best you're bound to come out, but I do hope Doctor Davidson won't think I'm impertinent, and horrid, and crazy!"

"So do I; it would be bad enough if he thought you were only one of those," said Mimi, and they both laughed as girls of sixteen can laugh at trifles.

That night Nancy crept into her beautiful new room at dusk alone. She had never lost her childish habit of creeping away by herself when she was puzzled, or troubled, to confide in the first Nancy Porter, her great-grandmother, who looked down upon her from the painting now hanging above the fireplace in this new room. Nancy had grown too old to talk to the picture, as she had once done, but it still held a strong personality for her and, wordlessly, she still found counsel before it, though in an older fashion. Now she rested her pale oval face on her hand and sat looking up at the picture, going over in her mind what Mimi had told her, fearing to fail in an appeal to the other Chagford doctor's generosity, if that were at stake, yet eagerly hoping to succeed.

Mrs. Porter came in and found Nancy thus.

"I was looking for you, daughter. Am I one too many with these Nancy Porters?" she asked, for she noted Nancy's pose and knew of old that this meant some sort of problem solving.

"You are never one too many with any one and me, motherkins!" cried Nancy, starting up. "And isn't this our hour?" All her life Mrs. Porter had given Nancy for her own the quiet hour of twilight between the day and the coming night. Much of the

best in her Nancy owed to this peaceful time in which her mother had kept her child's confidence and had shown her the purity and strength of a good woman's heart. Nancy drew her mother to the couch now and curled up beside her.

"Is father alone?" she asked.

"No. He is explaining something in chemistry to Rick. Nancy, Rick is less engrossed in music; he is suddenly deeply interested in science and especially in medicine, since your father was hurt. Do you know, I suspect the dear boy of trying to care for what our dear man most likes to teach!" said Mrs. Porter.

"Mother, I suspect Rick all the time of being the best, best, most loyal boy in all the world! Of course he is trying to interest father!" cried Nancy.

"We shall not love him less for it," said Mrs. Porter softly.

For nearly an hour the mother and daughter talked quietly in the gathering darkness. It was the doctor who interrupted them at last. Nancy sprang to guide him into the room, forgetting, as she often did, that light was now as dark to him as the deepest night.

"Come and hear our plan, Rick's and mine," the doctor said. "We are going to learn to read with

our fingers, he and I. He for sociability and I for necessity. I think there's a conspiracy afoot in the white Porter house to make me glad that my eyes are no more."

"Father, are you going out this morning?" asked Nancy the next day at breakfast. "Then, if you don't need Tonic, may Mimi and I have him to go on a little expedition? We could walk, so don't say yes if you and mother were going out."

"Your mother and I go so much less often than you and I that this sounds rather like a hint not to ask you to go with me," laughed the doctor. "I was not going out, Nancy, and you are welcome to Tonic."

"Thank you, daddy, though you are just a little impertinent to your only young lady daughter!" cried Nancy. "And may we go as soon as I can get my things on? It must be an early trip."

"Tell Stephen to harness Tonic, and then it depends upon yourself, how much time you spend titivating, as to how early you get off," said the doctor.

Nancy dropped a kiss on the doctor's gray hair and then rubbed it lightly the wrong way as she ran off. She was ready in less than quarter of an hour, but Tonic was at the gate before her. She

looked sweet and girlish in her long blue coat and soft drooping blue hat as she clambered into the sleigh, and her father, who had come out to speed her going, tucked the fur robe around her and felt for the reins to hand to her.

"I'd like to know, but I'll ask no questions," murmured the doctor suggestively.

"My good boy!" said Nancy approvingly. Then laughed and drove away without satisfying her father's natural curiosity as to her destination.

Mimi was waiting for Nancy and they lost no time in getting off.

"You see we must be there long enough before the doctor goes out to allow time to talk to him," said Nancy, trying, not very successfully, to hurry Tonic.

"Then if he isn't busy with patients, or there aren't many waiting to see him, or if he hasn't an urgent case, I'll be able to say what I want to say."

Nancy sprang out, tied Tonic to Doctor Davidson's tie-post and thoroughly blanketed him, like the competent young horsewoman she was, before she and Mimi mounted the steps and waited in trepidation the answer to their summons on the bell.

"No, Miss Porter, he hasn't any one in the office

now and nobody's waiting," said the Scandinavian maid who admitted them. "You can go right in."

"Will you come with me, or wait, Mimi?" asked Nancy. She was pale and her eyes were big and black, the iris nearly covered by the dilated pupil, but Mimi saw that she was going to carry out her plan.

"I may as well wait here," Mimi said, perching on the edge of the waiting-room couch as if she were ready for flight in either direction. Nancy pushed open the office door and went in alone.

Doctor Davidson looked up from the morning paper with which he was passing the time set aside for receiving possible callers. He laid it down and arose to shake hands with Nancy when he saw who it was. His: "Good morning, Nancy Porter," had in it the note of a question.

"Good morning, Doctor Davidson," responded Nancy, looking up into his face as if to see how good a morning he might make it for her. "May I talk to you about something — about father?"

"Surely, my dear. Is your father ill?" asked the doctor.

"No, sir," said Nancy. "But, Doctor Davidson, he is growing whiter and whiter, and he is so quiet that it frightens us. He tries to be his old self, but

he has to try so hard that he doesn't succeed. You see his life has stopped short, almost as if a bullet had ended his breathing. He can't get used to sitting, sitting, letting us look after him and try to amuse him. He can't endure being suddenly turned from such a wonderfully busy, useful man into a useless one — or one that feels useless. He never could be useless! We try to interest him, but — Doctor Davidson, can't you understand it? Father's life stopped short that dreadful day when he was blinded."

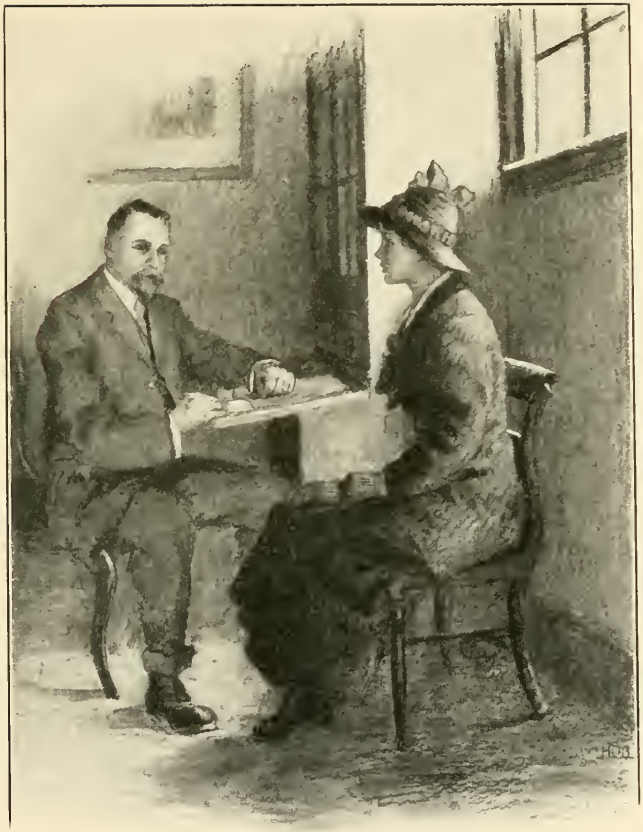
"Sit down, my dear," said Doctor Davidson, taking Nancy's arm and putting her into a chair, for she had been standing looking up into his eyes as she talked, twisting her hands nervously as she always did when greatly moved. "I understand only too well, my child. Doctor Ganson and I were talking about it yesterday when he called me over to the Falls to consult with him. I am sorry to say, Nancy, that you have interpreted your father aright. But what can be done, my dear? It is not a case for medicine. He is blind, and there is no getting around it. He has been, as you say, thrown violently out of life, put aside in full vigour of his strength. It is bitterly hard, but there it is. We can only hope that by and by, as he gets adjusted

to the fact, he will be resigned and find an outlet; a substitute, to a degree, for what he has lost."

"He is resigned now," said Nancy, controlling the sudden quiver of her lips. "He is not one who would murmur. But how can he go on like this? If he were better in the way you say, it would only mean getting old and worn-out, patient the way very old people are. It isn't a case for medicine, but isn't there any help for him?"

"I think you came to me with a plan, Nancy," said the doctor, looking at her sharply and kindly, feeling what everybody felt in Nancy, her womanliness and her entire childishness. "Did your mother send you?"

"No one knows I even thought of coming, except Mimi Hunt, and she is waiting in the reception-room; she came to keep me company," said Nancy. "Yes, Doctor Davidson, I have a plan. Could my father practise if people wanted him to? And if I went with him to help him see a little? I can read the clinical thermometer now. Couldn't I hold his watch if he counted a pulse, and couldn't I hand him anything he wanted — like a hypodermic needle, or the right bottle? And couldn't I tell him if there were something to be seen — like a tongue,



"'I THINK YOU CAME TO ME WITH A PLAN, NANCY.'"

for instance?" Nancy ended with a relapse into the child, for Doctor Davidson looked amused.

"Very possibly, my dear, if the patients weren't afraid," he said.

"No, but what I mean is, would it be wrong? Would the Medical Association or anybody make a fuss? I could easily learn to write prescriptions, take down father's dictation. And I thought if it were a case that needed a seeing doctor perhaps you would be willing to work with father? You see, I thought if he were practising it would be the only thing to save him," cried Nancy, forgetting her fear suddenly.

"Do you realize, my little girl, that there is a question of money underlying a practice?" asked the doctor.

"I wish there weren't!" cried Nancy. "Father would not care for that. He never sent in half the bills he should."

"I suppose you never thought that that might be a little hard on a doctor who did? A man is worthy of his hire. I've often been told that Doctor Porter had been 'easy on such an one,' and that I ought not to charge full rates," said Doctor Davidson.

"Father set aside so much of himself for the poor, just as some people pay so much of their in-

come to charity," said Nancy with dignity. "We always have had enough, and neither he nor my mother cared to be rich. Doesn't that make it hard that he should have to stop? Wouldn't you be willing to see his patients when they needed some one with eyes? And it wouldn't take much from your practice if father practised, too! It would save him. He is growing pale, and still, and will be old, Doctor Davidson! I'd go with him everywhere and stay out of the room till I was called in, and I'd get Mr. McCutcheon to teach me the prescription signs. Would it be wrong that way?"

"No, it wouldn't be wrong, of course," said Doctor Davidson. He arose and began to walk the floor. "Nancy, there is the hospital. Have you heard about that?" he asked.

"Only yesterday," said Nancy. "Mimi told me they might not make father the head of it now, but —" She stopped short.

"But me instead? That is true. And I'd like the honour and the salary, Nancy," said the doctor. "I admit to being more worldly than your father."

"Father sits outside the world now," said Nancy sadly, her voice tremulous and low. "Mother and I would gladly die for him, but we cannot lighten

his darkness, nor help him much. If you can make it possible for him to practise he will be less sad. Oh, he is so dear, so good, so unselfish! Won't you teach me to be his assistant really, as he used to call me when I was a tiny girl? And won't you work with him so that he can be part of the world still? And if there is any way of your having all the money I know that would be all right. And as to the honour, I think all Chagford will love you if you help their old doctor. Because Chagford loves my father, Doctor Davidson!"

"A man does not accept money which another man earns, Nancy," said Doctor Davidson. "As far as that goes I have lived all these years while your father practised here. Yes, I will help you. I will teach you anything that I can which will help you to see for your father. I will supplement his visits wherever it is necessary, but, to be honest, I think it will often be unnecessary. I will do more, Nancy. I will withdraw from the competition for the place of chief physician at the hospital, and your father will be appointed. He is more than competent; his blindness will not be in the way there, for there will be a staff under him."

"Doctor Davidson, oh, dear Doctor Davidson! cried Nancy, starting to her feet and holding out her

hands with tears running down her cheeks. "Oh, dear, dear Doctor Davidson!"

"The headship at the hospital will do more for your father than anything else could," said the doctor, taking the quivering little hands. "I have been uneasy in my mind that I have allowed them to consider me for the place. I will withdraw. No physician in the country has a more sensitive ear to hear a variation in a heartbeat, or a note of trouble in a lung than your father. I think, Nancy, we may get him to lecture at the hospital to young physicians hereabout. That would be a good thing — for him and them, both. Between us we will get your father back into life. I'm glad you came to me, my dear."

"I can't thank you, Doctor Davidson. People can't say just 'thank you' for such big things," said Nancy.

"I helped your father fight for your life, Nancy, when you came so near slipping away with scarlet fever, and that gives you a claim upon me. It gives me a little claim on you, also, since I helped to keep you here. I couldn't well refuse the sort of request you have made to me to-day. Nancy, does it occur to you that, though he be blind, your father has far more than I have?" asked Doctor Davidson,

still holding Nancy's hands. Nancy remembered that Doctor Davidson had no daughter, and that both his sons had "turned out badly," in the expressive phrase that often sums up ruin.

"You shall have a great deal more of what he has, after to-day," she said. And they sealed their bargain with a handshake that meant more than mere words.

Nancy and Mimi rode on in silence after they had left Doctor Davidson's house till they had gone beyond the sense of its hearing them talk of what had happened within it.

"Mimi, he was lovely, just perfectly lovely!" said Nancy then. "He's going to withdraw from the competition — I wonder if that is the way to say it? And he says he thinks father should lecture at the hospital to young physicians, because he is so fitted to. And, Mimi, that would be as good as it could be for my doctor-daddy! I felt so sorry for Doctor Davidson, Mimi! He asked me if I had thought that father has more than he has? He meant me, he meant the beautiful times that father and I have together. His sons aren't any comfort to him, are they?"

"Comfort to him! Why, they're awful trials," said Mimi. "They're both disgraces. I suppose it

is true that your father has more than he has, even if he is blind. But I'm so glad he was nice, Nancy! Everybody has said that Doctor Davidson was going to do all he could to be head physician at the hospital."

"It's a curious thing," said Nancy, with her old-fashioned little air of experience that contrasted so winningly with her youthful innocence of face and mind, "but people almost always like to do good things when they think about it. I've always noticed that. When they see how much nicer it is to be fine they usually are fine."

"Well, Nancy," said Mimi, smiling at her friend with admiring amusement, "I don't know whether that is true or not. You see we haven't grown up yet, and we haven't seen much of the world. I have an idea that there are a good many people who aren't so ready to be unselfish. I am sure the newspapers are full of stories of people getting the best of others and doing awful things — I don't mean murders, but cruel, hard things."

Nancy knit her brow; she was distressed, always, by wrong-doing. She considered the question for a moment, then brightened.

"Even then it doesn't prove I'm wrong!" she cried triumphantly. "I said when they *saw* how

much nicer it was to be fine! I suppose they — those others — don't see it. Very likely they have no one to show them. I still think everybody would be good if they saw it. Just see how perfectly lovely Doctor Davidson was! Yet you thought there was no use in my speaking to him; you know you did!"

"Well," admitted Mimi, "I don't suppose Doctor Davidson is hard hearted; he just wanted things for himself. I always thought he was fond of you, Nancy; maybe that helped."

"He spoke of the time when he fought to keep me alive in scarlet fever, and it did sound as if he had got interested in me," Nancy conceded. "Mimi, don't you see what? You said it yourself! It is loving people that makes everybody want to do right. So if only you can make people loving, you will make them good, and that is pretty much what I meant all along. For loving is seeing, isn't it?"

"I don't know I'm sure," said Mimi, stopping to give Nancy a little hug, there being no one within sight. "I never go into things the way you do. Maybe loving is seeing. I suppose you see what people need when you love them, and I suppose you see a lot of nice things about them that no one else can see — it certainly looks that way

when you think what dreadful freaks some people take a fancy to! But there's one thing I do know! And that is that seeing you is the same as loving you! I guess that's why you turn every old goose near you into a swan, why you find everybody so much better than I do."

"Well, I never turned you into a swan, that's plain!" laughed Nancy. "You are just straight goose still, Mimi, or you wouldn't talk like that!"

CHAPTER X

THE DOCTOR AND THE DOCTORETTE

WEEK later developed the results of Nancy's loving plotting. The first and most important result came at breakfast when Stephen arrived for his day's work — he lived with his family in the centre of the village — and brought with him the morning mail.

"Shall I read yours, Mark? Nancy is not here," said Mrs. Porter.

"Yes, she is! She hurried back to hear the budget," cried Nancy, flying into the room. "She only ran away for a minute to see Bumblebee's family. There are three kittens. One is all gray and I've named him Toodles. Another is black with white breast and paws, and that's to be Flip. The other is the queerest, mixed-up-est little thing you ever saw, all black, with yellow hairs so close together through her fur, and so many yellow patches that she looks rusted. 'Isn't she funny?' Letty Hetty

said. And I said: 'Yes, she shall be from this minute.' I've named her Funny. Am I to read your mail, or is this other lady to read it, Doctor Mark Porter?"

"I don't know that it matters seriously," replied the doctor. But Mrs. Porter was already slitting the envelopes with a fruit knife that lay at hand. She opened and unfolded a letter, glanced at it and uttered a low cry of pleasure.

"Oh, Mark, dear, listen!" she exclaimed. "It's from the Hospital Board."

"Oh, my!" cried Nancy, with an irrepressible jump of joy.

"Read it, my dear," said the doctor.

Mrs. Porter read: "'To Doctor Mark Porter, Respected and Beloved Sir: — We, the undersigned, officers and Executive Board of the Chagford Hospital, which is about to be formally opened for the benefit of the three towns of Chagford — Chagford, North Chagford and Chagford Falls — desiring to promote the welfare and usefulness of that institution as far as lies in our power, request you to accept the post of presiding medical officer of the hospital. We urge you to consider our request favourably, being convinced that no other could serve the hospital and public as you could, basing our opinion

upon your long years of medical practice among us and our repeated experience of your scientific knowledge and skill, your unfailing generosity and kindness, your devotion to the public weal and to the suffering and unfortunate, above all of your nobility of character and lofty principles. We, therefore, beg you, laying aside all disinclination, if any you feel, to consent to fill the post which we herewith urge upon you, fully convinced that your refusal would be injurious to the institution which has been so long a project dear to the hearts of all Chagford's citizens. Signed: William Davidson, M. D., Ellison Ganson, M. D., Thomas McCutcheon, Secretary." There followed the six names of the remaining members of the Hospital Board, which Mrs. Porter read, and then dropped the letter into her lap and looked at her husband speechlessly glad, tears in her eyes which did not matter since he could not see them.

"Daddy dearest, isn't that good? Good, and the rightest kind of right? Because it's nothing but true, all that they say!" cried Nancy, suddenly desperately afraid that her father might refuse to serve.

"If I thought that I were incompetent I would not take it," said Doctor Porter. "But my blindness will not affect my work there. Yes, I am glad,

Nancy; I am truly glad. I should be ungrateful not to be. They have spoken so kindly. I may tell you two dear big and little ladies that it has not been easy to drop entirely out of all work, to feel oneself an encumbrance."

The doctor arose and drew himself up, stretching out his arms as if he were awakening.

"Mark! Encumbrance! What a dreadful, what an unsuitable word!" cried his wife.

Nancy sprang to him and pulled the outstretched arms close around herself. "Sometimes an encumbrance just means nothing else than something that belongs to you. I heard Lawyer Tallman once ask you if some man had any encumbrances. And you said yes, a wife and two children, though I know you don't think a wife and one child an encumbrance! If you mean the word that way, Doctor Porter, we'll forgive it, but not otherwise. I'm so glad the hospital people wrote that letter! For the sake of the hospital! No, for mamma's and my sake, because we're so proud of you and so happy!"

The doctor held Nancy fast for a moment, just as she had placed his arms around her. "I'm happy, too, my bonny," he said. "It would be a hard heart that didn't beat quicker for kind words from the people among whom its owner had passed his life."

Letty Hetty came into the dining-room. "Doctor Porter," she said, "there's Mr. Evans's, the grocer's, oldest boy outside. He says will you go to see his sister. She's stuffed up, that's how he put it, but I found out he meant she had a cold on her chest. And he said the Slocums had sent down word to his father he should send up to you and ask you to see Mercy; she's somewhat sick."

"Well!" exclaimed the doctor cheerfully. "Well, why don't they send for Davidson, who can see them? Well, Nancy, does it mean that you and Tonic and I shall go?"

"Of course it does!" cried Nancy. "And the reason they don't send for Davidson is because they want Porter — isn't that an easy little riddle you asked, M. D., my daddy?"

"Run, then, and order our chariot and fiery steed! If it were Lydia who wanted to see me I might think there was no hurry, but Mercy Slocum is not the complaining sort, and if Annie Evans has a cold on her chest she must be attended to, for she has a tendency to pneumonia," said the doctor, in quite his old, brisk manner. "Mildred, I must ask you to see that I am equipped for a professional call. Is my bag in order?" he added.

Nancy ran up-stairs to make ready herself with

a heart so overflowing with gratitude and joy that she burst into singing at the last step and her voice came down to the doctor and his wife soaring up, sweet and shrill, in the trying top notes of "Sweet Afton," sung in a high key.

When she came down again in her hat and coat her cheeks were crimson and her eyes dancing. She had wound a soft crimson silk muffler above the broad blue collar of her coat, with an instinctive desire to look as glad as she felt.

"Ready, doctor?" she asked, in a business-like tone.

"Quite ready, Doctorette," responded her father, to her high delight; her new title pleased her greatly, it just fitted into her mood and aspirations.

"Now, daddy dearest, I've got to tell you something," said Nancy, tucking her hands into her muff. She refused to drive that day. "I'll tell you when anything's coming, so will Tonic himself, for that matter, and I do so want to drive together in our old way!" she had begged. For answer the doctor had taken the reins with a touch on her hand as they were passed to him that told Nancy that he understood her desire to make him feel that no great change had come upon him after all and that he thanked her.

"What do you want to tell me, my chicken?" the doctor asked.

"I didn't say that I wanted to tell you anything; I said that I'd got to tell you something," Nancy corrected him. "It's this: I knew you'd be going about among your old patients again, because they wouldn't let you stay at home, and I knew you'd take your old assistant with you, till you found a better one. So I've been learning the signs, when you write a prescription, you know. Doctor Davidson taught me. I wanted it to be a surprise to you. And he showed me how to time a pulse by the watch — and a few little things. So now, if you call me in when we're visiting somewhere I won't be such a stupidly ignorant pair of eyes for you as I was."

For an instant Doctor Porter was silent. Then all that he said was: "Thank you, my daughter. And thanks to Doctor Davidson; I'm afraid I haven't been quite just in my thoughts of him."

"He said that you had more than he, daddy. He meant that his sons were no comfort to him, didn't he? And I promised that he should have a little bit of your girl. We have suddenly become great friends," said Nancy.

"I am rich enough. I am ashamed that I have

been a little sad lately. But I would give a great deal to see you, my bonny. Though I think I can see the look on your face when I say that. So I'll never say it again, my Nancy! Truly, I am a happy man this morning, and grateful that apparently I can still be of a little use in the world."

Arrived at the Evans house Nancy said: "Now I am going to stay in the sleigh — I'm not the least speck cold! — and if you want me you can call me. If not, Tonic and I will stay here and sing to each other!"

"Nancy, if you sing as high as you sang before you started Annie Evans' fever will mount up so that the mercury in my thermometer will force a hole through the top!" said the doctor. "Tuck yourself in, Ladybird, and if I call you, come to me, Doctorette."

Nancy pulled the robe well up and happily watched her father go slowly, but straight up the little walk that led to the house, his feet guided by the flagstones. It was not long before she heard his voice calling her from an up-stairs window, and she sprang to obey the summons and to put her new accomplishments to the test.

"Nancy, please take my watch and time my counting Annie's pulse," the doctor said. "Tell me

when a minute has passed. Now," he went on, when this was done, "time the thermometer and read it for me. You may tell me what it registers by pressure in my hand: I shall understand."

Nancy nodded and obeyed, anxiously watching the second hand of the watch which she held, and when the minute was past, pressing her father's palm five times, and then once. He understood that this meant five degrees and one-fifth above normal, and frowned slightly, for his patient was sicker than he had expected.

He gave the girl's mother directions for the care of her, and Nancy knew that he was anxious. "Yes, it is pneumonia, but Annie will see to it that it is only a light case," he said kindly. "Nancy, write the prescription that I will dictate to you, please."

Nancy took the professional pad and her father's fountain-pen and proudly wrote from his dictation. No spelling out the words this time! The signs of quantity she made with the utmost satisfaction, and wrote the crossed "R" that signifies recipe, and the "S-i-g.," before writing the directions for taking with a happy sense of her own competence.

"We will come again this afternoon," said Doctor Porter rising. "I think you must have some

one here to help you, Mrs. Evans. Shall I send for Mrs. Galvin from Chagford Falls?"

"Well, if you could, Doctor Porter, get word to her somehow, I'd be truly thankful," said Mrs. Evans. "I'd rather nurse Annie myself, but when those boys come home hungry I've got to have some one to feed 'em."

"I'll telephone over and have a message sent to the Widow Galvin," said the doctor, pulling on his gloves. "And, Mrs. Evans, if you've the least fear that a blind man cannot take care of Annie, send for Doctor Davidson: I'll be entirely willing."

"For the land sakes, no!" cried Mrs. Evans. "If I'd have wanted him I'd have sent for him in the first place. As soon as I heard you were going to go on practising, I said: 'The first one of us gets sick we send for our own doctor.'"

"She heard that I was going on practising, Doctorette! I wonder how!" said Doctor Porter, after he and Nancy had started on their way again.

"I don't know," said Nancy demurely. Nor did she. But she did know that all their old friends were spreading the tidings, and that Nancy herself had asked them to do so. At the Slocum sisters' Nancy had nothing to do; it was not a case that needed the pulse timed, nor the temperature taken.

Mercy Slocum was tired, she was growing chronically tired, for her sister Lydia was crippled for life, and years under this burden were telling on the gentler sister. Still, Cord lived with them, and Cord was equal to several ordinary mortals by way of cheering and efficiency — when she was not proving a strain upon the patience of these elderly women by her irrepressible spirits and what they suitably called "her monkey shines."

"You come along with me, Nancy Sugarplum," ordered Cord. "There isn't anything for you to see for your father in there. All he's got to do is to give Mercy something to wind her up again. She says she's all run down, so I guess winding up's what she needs! You come along with me. I've been wanting to talk to you."

"Well, but father may want to write something, a prescription, you know," objected Nancy.

"No, he won't!" declared Cord positively. "I'll run down and get anything he orders from the drug store by and by. I'll tell him! Doctor Porter, Nancy's going to come out and let me tell her something. If you need her to write a prescription she can do it just as well when you're ready to go."

"All right, Cord," agreed the doctor. "I'm not sure that is not asking a permission to abduct Nancy,

but I'll pretend I'm sure," he added to Mercy Slocum.

"Such a child! And gettin' more monkeyfied every day. But she's the smartest piece! Lets things go till we're 'most crazy, and then works like a streak of lightnin' and ketches up, and is so clever you can't keep mad with her," said Mercy admiringly.

"Nancy, come out here in the kitchen," said Cord, leading the way. "Take that rocking-chair, only don't lean too hard on the left side; it's weak. Now, what do you s'pose I've got to tell you?"

"There wouldn't be any use guessing, Cord," said Nancy.

"There wouldn't; you're right. I've found out who my parents were," said Cord, one bright black eye on Nancy, bird fashion.

"Your parents! Why, you knew!" cried Nancy. "Weren't you the great-granddaughter of that old Mrs. Anstetter, over at Chagford Falls?"

"S'posed to be!" said Cord mysteriously. "Though she wasn't parents anyhow. But it's all a mistake. My father and mother — Now guess what they were?"

"Oh, Cord, I can't!" cried Nancy, agog with interest. "Tell."

"My father and mother were the Duke and Duchess of Lavington-Bludosheim. They were travelling around the world when I was a baby and they were shipwrecked. They tied me to a board and let me go, and I went — all the way to shore. The reason they called me Cord wasn't short for Cordelia, as I always thought, but because I was tied to that board with a cord. It's all been found out and proved, and I'm going to get the family fortune and a lot of crown jewels," said Cord rapidly.

"Cord, what a ridiculous yarn! I don't believe a word of it!" cried Nancy.

"Don't you? There's where you're dead right; neither do I. I just thought I'd see how 'twould strike you," said Cord calmly. "Say, Nancy, it would be great all right if 'twas true, wouldn't it? But the thing I had to tell you wasn't about me when I was a baby. It was about that horseback riding. Is it true you girls are going to learn?"

"Mimi and Amabel and I are: father is going to let me ride Sanitas. And Doris will ride if mother and father can get her aunt to let her. Rick is going to learn. Why?" asked Nancy.

"And the Coggses? You didn't put them in," said Cord.

"But they are to be in," said Nancy. "I forgot them. Why, Cord?"

"Because I want to be in it, too," cried Cord. "Say, Nancy, if there's anything in all this world I would like to be in it's this. Won't you let me learn with the rest of the gang?"

"Why, Cordie, of course I'll let you, if there's any let about it. It would be getting a horse for you that would be the trouble. I'd be delighted if you were with us — if you wouldn't cut up and make all the horses stand on their hind legs at once and throw every one of us over the moon!" added Nancy.

"If it's only a horse that keeps me back I'll get one, don't you worry!" said Cord, with a decision of manner that Nancy had long learned to dread. "Is it a go?"

"As far as I am concerned," said Nancy. "Father is starting the plan, but he'll be willing, I'm sure."

"He will if you ask him," said Cord. "All right then, Nancy chocolate-cream! I'm in. And I'll tell you one thing: I'll be the only one of the lot that won't have to learn to ride! I'll bet I could ride a broken bunco."

"Ride a — Oh, you mean a bucking bronco!"

And Nancy fell over on her side laughing so heartily that she forgot Cord's warning. The side of her chair against which she leaned was the left one: it proved as weak as Cord had warned her that it would. Chair and girl went over in a heap on the floor, from which Cord disentangled them, laughing so that she could hardly raise the broken chair arm, while Nancy crawled on her hands and knees to the kitchen table against which she leaned laughing till she could weakly pull herself on her feet by its aid.

The doctor and Mercy came out to see what was wrong, the latter ready to blame Cord, knowing by experience that whatever happened she was at the bottom of it, but Doctor Porter smiling with pleasure to hear his Nancy's peals of laughter, for she had not laughed much since her father's accident.

"You've broke the kitchen rocker, Cord!" cried Mercy Slocum.

"No, Miss Mercy! She warned me not to lean on the left arm, but I forgot, and the chair and I just crumpled up together," explained Nancy. "Father, will you let me send Miss Mercy that rocker that used to be in my sitting-room and which we couldn't make at home anywhere else?"

"Surely, Nancy. And write a prescription for

me to give Cord to have filled for Mercy at Mr. McCutcheon's, please." The doctor held out his pad and pencil for Nancy's acceptance.

"May Cord learn to ride with the rest of the girls, father?" asked Nancy, in obedience to frantic signals from Cord.

"Why, surely, if we can get her a horse. And we'll try to," said the kind doctor.

"I'll find a horse," said Cord. "Hurrah for the doctor and his angel daughter!"

"Well, nobody will ever hurrah for you as an angel, Cordelia Tilden!" said Mercy Slocum. But the look of pride and affection that she turned upon the dark little elfish creature contradicted the condemnation in her voice.

"It's been a happy morning, Doctorette," said Doctor Porter, offering Nancy his hand at their own gate an hour later. "It is unspeakably delightful to be driving Tonic on professional visits again, with you as my real assistant. Do you think my darkest days of blindness are over? I do."

CHAPTER XI

THE VALKYRIES

ANCY had a busy week. Annie Evans was seriously ill: it proved to be a dangerous case of pneumonia, and Doctor Porter visited her thrice daily until the critical time had passed. Other patients summoned him, to all of whom Nancy went with her father, sometimes sitting contentedly in the sleigh while the doctor made his visit, more often going into the house to time a pulse, describe an appearance, read the clinical thermometer or write a prescription at his dictation.

It was a singular experience to Nancy thus to be her father's eyes and right hand, but interesting to a degree that made ordinary girlish employments seem dull. In the mean time she was studying hard to give her father real work to do to help her, in his turn, with the classics and the literature that he loved. Altogether Nancy was a busy girl.

But the doctor realized the danger of absorbing too much of Nancy's time; he did not mean that she should live for him alone, though she would gladly have dropped out of the companionship of the girls if he would have allowed it, and needed her.

"I have been arranging for the riding lessons," the doctor announced one day, early in February. "The Coggs girls have got together four horses — I think that they sent to Boston for them. Amabel is provided, so is Mimi, you know. Stephen has heard of a reliable horse for Rick. I've no idea what Cord means to do, but I'm not afraid it will not be something with a go in it. If you get on as well with Sanitas as I expect you to you'll find that you have a good saddle horse. I'm going to let you ride with Stephen, all of you, a few times; then, if it seems safe, you may ride alone."

"Can Stephen teach us, daddy dear?" asked Nancy doubtfully.

"He can teach, if you can learn," said the doctor. "Stephen knows a horse in the only way one can be known — by heart! He's an ex-cavalry man, remember."

"I'm crazy to ride!" cried Nancy. "When are we to begin?"

"I thought we'd assemble the troop this afternoon," said the doctor.

"I can't even mount!" sighed Nancy. "But won't it be fine to see all these horses together for us to use!"

"If you can't mount I think it is safe to say that you can't ride, missy," laughed the doctor. "However, I hope to see you on Sanitas — old habits are hard to break off, lassie. I mean that I hope to feel your foot secure in his stirrup!"

"It's like the gathering of the clans!" cried Nancy rapturously that afternoon as horse after horse assembled in the Porter driveway, some brought there by stablemen, some ridden there cautiously by their future girl riders. "I do think it must be splendid to belong to a cavalry troop! It's sport just to stand close to all these glossy horses and hear them breathe, even if you never mounted one."

"Now that's the way to feel toward horses if you want to make a rider," said Stephen approvingly. "And splendid to belong to a cavalry troop! Nancy, you haven't a mite of idee what it's like. I'd give more to be one of the rush of a troop, feel yourself goin' along with those drilled horses, and hear the accoutrements clingin' and clashin'

than I would to be an angel — in this world anyhow!"

"I can imagine just how you feel, Stephen," cried Nancy sympathetically. "And there's more chance of being a cavalryman than an angel here below. Will you show me how to mount?"

"Don't you know how, Nancy?" asked Amabel, wheeling her horse to prove how thoroughly she was a horsewoman. "It's perfectly simple. But I took some lessons in England, while I was abroad."

"I took some lessons in Chagford while I was at home," said Mimi quietly. They all objected to Amabel's superior air. "A big brother isn't especially useful, but mine did teach me a little about riding."

"The way we mounted at first was to pile up some things level with the horse and step over," said Taizie Coggs, with her jolly laugh.

"All but me. I climbed an old apple tree and made Dais lead the horse under it and hold him. Then I dropped. He was surprised," said Hazie.

"I think I may as well begin right," laughed Nancy. "Trust you double twins to do something to surprise your horse — and other people! Please, Stephen, what shall I do first?"

"THE FIRST THING SHE KNEW SHE WAS IN HER SADDLE."

"You put your foot in your stirrup, and your hand on your pommel, and then you kind of keep on coming up. First thing you know you'll be seated. I'll give you my hand to mount. Put your foot in it: then up you go!" Stephen instructed her.

"It sounds easy!" said Nancy, as she obeyed the first of these orders.

"Why, it isn't hard!" For, true to Stephen's prophecy, the first thing she knew she was in her saddle on Sanitas' back, and Stephen was proudly arranging her skirt.

"Here comes Cord! I was wondering about her!" cried Mimi. "And poor Doris! Her aunt wouldn't let her ride. She's at home crying her eyes out, I know."

"Do you suppose mother and father have gone to persuade Miss Clark? They went off with Tonic but didn't say where they were going," suggested Nancy. "Do you all see Cord?"

They all did. Mounted on a melancholy looking steed, with a brown worsted skirt that unmistakably had once been Lydia Slocum's, which gave it abundant, though sorry length for little Cord as a riding skirt, a "ting-a-ling" worsted cap as a riding hat, and a thick sweater for her coat, Cord, with her

dark, flashing face and slender little figure was a comical sight.

"You needn't try not to laugh!" Cord saluted her friends from a distance. "I know I look like everything, but I don't care! And if you care, any of you, I'll take another road — or you can." She ambled up and stopped, which seemed easier than the ambling, when one scrutinized the horse.

"Where did you get him?" asked Rick. "He's got points, Cordie, there's no denying that. The trouble is he is pretty much all points!"

"He belongs to Mr. Black, the butcher," began Cord. "I don't mean he's got him to kill," she added, as her hearers shouted. "He took him for debt; I guess it couldn't have been a big debt. But he says this horse is kind of young, about eleven, and he says he won't be one bit bad after he gets fed up. Lydia and Mercy say I may have him. I mean they'll feed him if I'll earn him. So I'm going to take him and pay Mr. Black by doing his bookkeeping after school."

"Cordie! Never!" cried Mimi. "Oh, Cord, are you crazy?" added a Coggs.

"When will you get time to do anything more than you have to do?" chimed in Nancy.

"I'll make time; I'm dying for a horse," said Cord.

"But that horse!" said Rick eloquently.

"Look here, Rick, don't you run down my horse —he's far enough run down anyhow! And he's going to be fine when I've taken care of him. He isn't as dead as he looks now. I'd like to know what I'd look like if I hadn't had a home given me? So I'm going to adopt Joy. I've named him Joy to sort of encourage him. I want him to understand his good times are beginning. Besides, I'm going to say I'm having a joy ride when I take him out. Oh, I knew you'd all pretty near kill yourselves laughing!" Cord ended with a laugh herself that threw her over on Joy's neck it was so hearty.

"I never saw the beat of that youngster in all my career!" said Stephen. "Unless it is the Coggs twins. Hadn't we ought to be moving, my ridin' school?"

"We are Valkyries!" cried Nancy, checking a shout as she felt Sanitas bearing her along for the first time, fearing that a shout might startle him. But her caution was wasted, for Cord struck her Joy with her open palm and passed Sanitas with a shout that would have been a credit to a Comanche maiden.

"Now see here, Cordie, you go kinder easy and quiet at first," said Stephen. "If you're goin' to ride that colt that's all blood — with a few bones! — you do it without yellin', for these girls ain't used to keepin' their seats when a horse jumps. What's a Valkyrie, Nancy?"

"She's a Northern daughter of the gods, and she comes riding down on the clouds and the winds and the storm and lightning, brandishing her spear and shouting her war cry," screamed Nancy, quite borne away by the intoxication of feeling handsome Sanitas break into a slight trot at Stephen's command.

"Like this," added Rick, and began to sing Brünhild's War Cry, in which Nancy joined, her girlish voice soaring up far above Rick's compass.

"Well, that don't seem much of a tune; I believe I'd ruther ride to good old 'Jingle Bells,' if that other was sung by a goddess," chuckled Stephen.

The first riding lesson went wonderfully well. If some of the girls did bounce up and down more than the law allows, none of them was timid, none showed the least tendency to dismount hastily, ahead of time. Rick rode gracefully and naturally, but he had the advantage of being a boy and having

often taken Tonic to the blacksmith shop under saddle, and of stolen rides on other horses. Amabel and Mimi were not precisely novices, either, but the Coggs and Nancy were taking their first lesson and covering themselves with glory. The Coggs did not know what fear was, and Nancy had the higher courage that is nervously ready to recognize danger, but will never admit it. Stephen quite glowed with pride in the daughter of his family as she guided handsome young Sanitas under his instructions.

"Let's stop and surprise Grandma Emerson, and then ride up to the stone house and show Miss Dorinda and Miss Belinda how fine we are," suggested Nancy. "Why, who's this riding toward us? It's Doris, as sure as I'm alive!"

It was. Doris in a long blue skirt that Nancy instantly recognized as her mother's, her face beaming, yet terror-stricken, for she was alone, coming to meet these others, and she was riding, actually *riding* a small chestnut horse from the livery which Rick knew as one that was kept entirely for women's hiring, but which was not supposed to be a saddle horse.

"How did you do it?" cried Taizie Coggs.

"Did 'mine' do it?" cried Nancy, at the same

moment. For convenience she often shortened "my father and mother" into "mine."

"Of course they did," said Doris, coming up and checking her horse carefully, as if anything might happen if she stopped him abruptly. "Did you ever know the time, as far back as you know anything, when your father and mother didn't come and talk Aunt Augusta 'round, whether it was playing with dolls, or going somewhere, or eating things — always something I wanted to do and Aunt Augusta thought I shouldn't. Doctor Porter and your mother, Nancy, came to-day, and told Aunt Augusta how good it was for a girl's health to ride, and how it was expected of young ladies nowadays to know how to do things like that, and how they had wanted you to learn, and at last how they'd take it as a personal favour if she'd let me ride with you, till she had to give in. And the minute she gave in the doctor whipped me into the buggy with him, and had me around at the livery stable getting this horse, which we led back to my house, before Aunt Augusta had time to wink — and your mother was keeping her busy entertaining her all the time, anyway! And she had this skirt ready with her, and made me put it on — she told Aunt Augusta that she felt sure she would see it as they did! —

and they had me started before I could take in that I was going. So here I am. I'm all swollen up from crying, but I don't care now. And if ever there were two perfect angels and archangels they are Doctor Porter and his wife! They've got for me about all the fun I ever had in my life. Where are you going?"

"Past Grandma Emerson's to show her what crackerjacks we are, and then on up to the Allaires' to do them the same favour. Good for you, Doris; it's fine that you've come," said Rick heartily. And the augmented cavalcade went on its way.

"I declare I thought at first I was going to be mustered in!" cried Grandma Emerson, running out of her house as lively as a cricket when the young people rode up. "I don't think I've seen such a troop since the Civil War, when the Massachusetts regiments were starting — and land knows, this is a happier sight!" cried the dear little old lady. "Dismount, won't you, all of you, and come in and let me find something good to eat — if Dean and I have anything?"

"Aren't you ashamed, Grandma, to run out without your shawl?" cried Dean Okley, following Mrs. Emerson to wrap her in a soft knitted wool scarf shawl. "Dear girls, and boy, how nice you look!"

"We can't come in, Grandma Emerson; we only stopped to show you our glory," cried Nancy. "Wish you were with us, Dean. We are going up to show ourselves to the Misses Allaire, and then home. Sanitas is lovely. I'm going to love him best as a saddle horse, and Tonic best as a driving horse, and then it will be quite fair."

"Good-bye!" shouted the riders, and favoured Grandma Emerson by venturing on their first gallop in leaving her, so that the clatter of hoofs sounded merrily up the street as they retreated.

Up the long driveway of the Allaire "stone house" they came, riding soberly under its noble trees, Rick and Nancy in advance, the four Coggs, Amabel and Mimi, Doris and Cord, two by two, with Stephen in the rear, since here it was safe. They rode around the house, seeing no one in the front, and wanting to give the Allaire sisters the surprise of discovering them in procession.

Miss Belinda did discover them and called her sister to see them, almost as excited by the spectacle as were the young folks themselves. In the progression the riders turned out of the driveway that circled around the house, and took a short canter down a branch of it that led to the stables and farm buildings farther away. There was a gate built on

the principle of field bars, or a steeple chase hurdle; two upright posts with bars across. In the turns that the riders had made Cord, on her melancholy horse, had drifted ahead. The melancholy horse surprised them all. In his palmy days he had been trained for hurdle leaping and the good food of the past three days, in which he had lived with the Slocums, although it had not affected his physical appearance yet, had cheered his mind. When he saw that gate he felt that he saw his duty and must do it. Without any warning he started at a trot that increased to a gallop, headed for the gate, drew his legs together and leaped it! Everybody screamed; Stephen, recognizing the case, shouted to Cord to hold on.

Cord held on for dear life. Throwing herself forward on the horse's lean and out-stretched neck she dropped the reins and clung to him with an embrace that nothing could have broken, clutching the horse wherever she could grasp him with her nervous, thin little hands that could hold tighter than stronger ones. To the unspeakable gratitude of her friends behind her Cord and her fiery steed landed safe, unharmed, and as one, upon the other side of the hurdle! Being over it, Joy turned and contemplated the gate with his absurd long face, grave

and sad, much as one might contemplate a temptation that had proved too strong for him.

Now that it was over — in a double sense — and safely over, the girls and Rick fairly dissolved in laughter. They sat rocking up and down in their saddles, crying, choking, sobbing, shrieking, till every servant in the Allaire house, and the Misses Allaire themselves had joined them. Miss Dorinda and Miss Belinda had seen the feat of the melancholy horse, and came laughing upon the scene, hardly less convulsed than the riders, but rather more frightened.

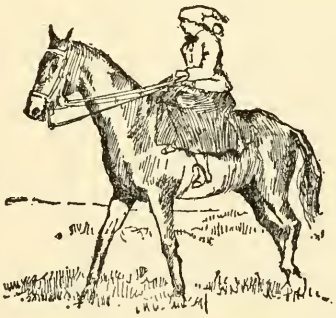
Nancy dried her eyes helplessly on Sanitas' mane and raised her face from his neck, upon which she had fallen, wholly unable to sit up.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she gasped. "I never, never, *never* saw anything half as funny as that was!"

"Say, Stephen, could you open that gate and let me through?" asked Cord. "Oh, thanks," she added, as one of the housemaids performed the service. "I didn't want to come back the same way! Say, girls, what did I tell you? Wasn't I pretty near right when I named him Joy? I'm the only one in the bunch that's got a trick horse. Just you wait till I get so I can stick on him and I'll jump him purposely. It kind of surprised me this time."

"Surprised you! I only wish I could have taken a moving picture film of that performance!" gasped Rick, rubbing his cap back with his cuff, for his brow was moist from laughter. "The look of deadly terror on your face, and then the way you dropped, and that toast rack of an animal leaped! Well, sir, it beat anything I ever saw, as Nancy says. If the horse weren't so fearfully sad looking it wouldn't be so killing, but it's just as if a piece of crêpe suddenly turned into a red and yellow plaid."

"Or an undertaker turned into a ballet dancer," added Miss Belinda. "I can't forget that little Cord might have been hurt. Come in, dear youngsters, and let us celebrate with cake and hot chocolate! I'm sure you've entertained us enough to have earned a reward, and laughter is an excellent appetite-sharpener."



CHAPTER XII

THE COUNTESS VALTINO

HEN Nancy and Rick told the story of that afternoon at the supper table the same night Doctor and Mrs. Porter laughed till they cried. Nancy thought that she had never seen her father laugh as he did over the story of Cord's unseemly Joy.

"If Cordie is going to buy that horse, and if the Slocums will actually let her keep him, we must find a way to reduce the purchase price," said the good doctor, when they had settled down. "We can't let Cordie go to school, do housework and work to pay much for a horse as well. I'll speak to Black to-morrow and tell him to take something off the price of the horse and put the difference on my butcher's bill as — well, steak would be appropriate, only it must be spelled the other way. That steed suggests sweepstakes! If we don't get the price

settled before Black hears of his spirited behaviour to-day he won't sell him under a hundred."

"I understood that he asked Cord fifty for him, and is going to pay her five dollars a week to come in after school and make up his day's accounts, but maybe it isn't as much," said Rick. "Oh, yes, and give him all her Saturday afternoons."

"Poor, plucky little Cordie! At that rate it would be a long time before her investment yielded her returns. She'll never have a chance to use him. However, I'll find a way to shorten her bondage," said the doctor.

And he did. Cord never knew what arrangements that real friend of youth made for her, but she found her service for Joy unexpectedly lightened, and gratefully settled down to the blissful possession of her horse.

The riding lessons continued daily; for a time with Stephen, soon without him, for there was not a horse in the group who could not be trusted, and the youngsters rode fearlessly and well. Sanitas proved himself young and frolicsome, but not wicked. Nancy felt a pardonable pride in her growing ability to control his playfulness, and the pale little maiden and the big chestnut horse grew to be the best of friends.

Stephen brought up a heavy mail when he arrived on the morning of the fourteenth of February. All the boys and girls of her acquaintance sent Nancy valentines, nor was Rick far behind her in the number of cards and other more pretentious tokens which this day brought him.

"This is from Amabel," said Nancy, holding up a sachet valentine that wafted an odour of heliotrope as she moved it. "And this is from Louise, I'm certain." She displayed a butterfly bow of lace held by a heart-shaped band of gold, set with a turquoise in the bend of the heart. "I wonder what Miles has sent her? Something lovely, of course. And this is from one Coggs and these are from the others; they always take any excuse to send me something too nice for me!" She held up a box of candy tied with a wide satin ribbon, a jewelry box lined with valentine-like lace paper, candy filled, a ring box containing a delicately wrought "pinky ring," with a twisted row of turquoises apparently twined around it, and a box of letter paper stamped with a monogram N. P., surmounting the name of Chagford, Massachusetts. "I don't know what is to be done with those girls!" sighed Nancy, delighted, yet with misgivings. "They are just like four horns of plenty, pouring out good things."

"Well, we've had that out with the Coggs. We decided that they sincerely feel that we do more for them than they do for us, so it doesn't matter that they have so much more to spend than most girls. They love you, Nancy, and love to please you, and you love them and try to give them pleasure, so it is all one, under different forms," said Mrs. Porter. "I have learned that the Coggs would be utterly miserable if they thought we counted pennies in the matter. That can't be a valentine, Rick, that you are reading? Is it the Italian cousin?"

"Yes, Mrs. Porter. And she is in New York," said Rick. "She would like to come to Chagford by Monday. I suppose she can?"

"As well one day as another. Mark, will you and Nancy stop on your round of visits to see what can be got for her at the old inn? Then we'll send there anything that we think her room needs," said Mrs. Porter. "I wish we knew her, and her tastes."

"I'm the only one that knows her," said Nancy laughing. "She spoke to me at the theatre and on the ship, before any of us knew she was Rick's cousin, but that doesn't help me to know her tastes. She looked so lovely that I believe she'll be ready to like everything. Have we many visits to make this morning, M. D. — my daddy?"

"Only two, Doctorette. But I'd like to start at once, if it suits your unprofessional arrangements," returned the doctor.

"I'll be ready in fifteen minutes, fatherums. I must make my bed and show my room a duster; wave one at it, at least, and then I'll be ready for my Tonic and my Dower," said Nancy, hurrying away with her arms full of pretty things piled on the candy and letter paper boxes.

"Isn't it a comfort to know that Nancy really feels that I'm her dower since I became dependent upon her, Mildred?" said the doctor, listening to the girl's feet flying up the stairs, and to her happy singing.

"Nancy is a true little woman, Mark; she finds her keenest joy in taking care of what she loves. I'm thankful that she is a womanly girl," said Mrs. Porter.

"She's her mother's own daughter, Mildred, dear, and I'm thankful indeed for that. There is another woman growing up in Nancy to play the woman's part of counsellor, comforter, home-maker," said the doctor. "Only a mother like Nancy's could have a daughter like Nancy."

"Well, we're the most mutually satisfied family I ever saw!" cried Mrs. Porter, laughing with

happy moisture in her eyes. For it is no slight thing to hear such tribute as the doctor had paid her from one who had tested his wife by the difficult test of thirty years of life together.

Doctor Porter and Nancy drove off together in the sleigh that the recent thaw almost forbade using. Nancy drove because she had to guide Tonic from side to side of the road, following the snowiest spots, and even then succeeded only in keeping one runner out of the mud half the time.

They stopped at the Chagford Inn, which was the oldest hostelry in the three Chagfords, not pretentious like the Somerset Arms, or the Washington House, the two newer, somewhat gorgeous hotels which bid for the custom of travelling salesmen and summer boarders. But the inn had a charm that newer houses could never attain, and the Porters and Rick felt sure that Rick's "Italian cousin," as they called her, would prefer it.

The landlady took them up its broad, low stairway, with its hand-cut balustrade of white painted railings and a mahogany handrail, polished by the passing of the hands of guests for a hundred and fifty years, and more.

"This is the best room, leastways the two on each side the hall are alike, but this one's the

sunniest and warmest," said the landlady, Mrs. Halleck, opening the door of the chamber on the east side of the hall when Doctor Porter and Nancy had come up.

"Isn't it dear?" cried Nancy fervently. "Father, the paper is a pale gray groundwork, with great, natural red roses and their green leaves thrown at it; they just stuck wherever they happened to hit; nobody seems to have designed them. And the carpet is gray with a red border, a rug carpet, with a band of dark maroon paint around the room. And the furniture is old-time mahogany, bed and bureau and two straight chairs, and there are two willow chairs with chintz cushions, all blossoming with cardinal red roses. It's the dearest room imaginable, Mrs. Halleck. I'm sure the Countess Valtino will love it! And an old-fashioned open stove! Isn't that the last touch!"

"That's a Franklin," said Mrs. Halleck, greatly pleased by Nancy's appreciation of her "best room," but disdaining to betray the fact. "Benjamin Franklin may have helped this country a lot with France in the Revolution, and he may have discovered lightnin' — I mean electricity — with a kite, but I always did say he's helped Americans full's much when he got up that Franklin stove. No

stuffocatin' air in a room that's usin' a Franklin! Want I should let the lady have this room? Or will you look at the other? It's just as good, but not near so cheerful, and the wind does blow more from the west, and sharper, than from the east in winter."

"Oh, I'm sure no other can be half as nice as this one!" cried Nancy. "Do you think there's any use in bothering Mrs. Halleck to show us any more rooms, father?"

"I think you must decide, since I cannot see the rooms. I'm sure from your description that this one is delightful; I seem to feel its cordiality," said the doctor.

"I'll give her this, then," said Mrs. Halleck. "What do you call her? A countess? And an Eyetalian? My land, I don' know's I'll know what to do with her! Can't she speak English? I ain't goin' to give her a title. 'Tisn't American. Hasn't she got any name you can call her, like other women? Married or single?"

"There are a good many questions at once, Mrs. Halleck!" laughed Doctor Porter. "She speaks English. Nancy met her coming out of a theatre in New York some five years ago and she spoke to her. It is quite a romantic story. She noticed Rick's resemblance to her family and asked Nancy

who he was. That led to her discovering Richard. Then, the next day, when Miss Belinda Allaire took the children to say good-bye to Amabel Willis, when she was sailing to Europe, there on the ship was the mysterious lady! She spoke to Nancy again, but there was no time for more than getting our address. She wrote to Nancy, and so found Richard Lovering, her young cousin. She spoke English well, only with an accent, Nancy said, and she writes it perfectly; you will be able to talk with her easily. As to her name, she is married, and is called Madam Bianca Gardi, the Countess Valtino. You could manage to call her countess, couldn't you? It's a word no longer than our Mistress, or Mrs., after all."

"Not American," repeated Mrs. Halleck decidedly, as she shut the door behind her callers and turned the key in its lock. "I guess I'll call her Mrs. Valtino. When'll she get here?"

"Monday. We'll write her to-day, telling how successfully we've arranged for her comfort," said the doctor, waiving the question of title, and deciding that to be called "Mrs. Valtino" would add to the countess' enjoyment of her lodgings if she had any sense of humour. "Thank you, Mrs. Halleck. Good morning."

The doctor and Nancy drove comfortably away, so well satisfied with their visit, with each other, with the soft, sunshiny February day that they did not mind the occasional grating of the runners on the bare spots.

"Nevertheless it must be the buggy to-morrow, for Tonic's sake," said the doctor, as the sleigh cut through where Nancy thought the snow had been solid. "Do you hear that song sparrow?"

"Yes, and I thought I heard a peewee, but I didn't say anything, because it's so hard to find that the first birds are only somebody's windmill, or a chicken, after all," said Nancy.

"But there's a feeling of spring to-day," said the doctor. "It may, it surely will, be blown away for a while in March, but spring never quite repudiates these first pledges she gives us; she always comes, sooner or later, when she sets out. Nancy, I've been thinking," Nancy's father went on. "I'm better adjusted to my loss, and with the charge of the hospital which they have given me so beautifully, and with our studies together, I have enough to do without practising medicine. I won't get old and grumpy and dumpy as I know you and your mother were afraid that I should! It's absurd for an old doctor to absorb a young girl's life. If I've

got to take you with me on my visits I'd better give them up."

"Father, I love it!" cried Nancy.

"Surely, dear heart, I know that!" replied her father. "But it can't go on. Do you know what I think that I'll do? I think I'll try to find some nice young lad with a desire to study medicine and take him to read with me. Then he can go on and study, graduate, and come here to inherit my practice. What do you think of the suggestion, Assistant?"

Nancy's thoughts flew back to the day when Rick had said that this very thing was what he would like to do. She had heard no more of it, but perhaps —

"Father, dearie, have you heard of any such young man?" she asked.

"No, but he exists, Nancy, and he will be just as glad to be found as we should be to find him," replied the doctor. "I have faith to believe that in greater things as in lesser ones, a need means the creation of something to supply it. What do you think of my suggestion, Doctorette?" he repeated.

"I think it may be rather wonderful," said Nancy, to her father's surprise; he heard a note of

excitement in her voice. But she would not say any more, and the doctor decided that she felt disturbed by the idea of his giving up practice; perhaps at the thought that a stranger might, in a sense, take her place with him.

On the following Monday Rick took Nancy, with Sanitas in the surrey, and drove to the station to meet what he called his "imported relative." Both the boy and the girl rather dreaded the ordeal of escorting her to the inn and establishing her there. She was so entirely a stranger to them, and such a strange stranger, for Italian countesses were unknown in that corner of the world.

There was nothing to dread about it, as they found out the moment that the Countess Valtino came down from the car and looked eagerly along the platform for "the children," as she thought of them. She was slight, as graceful as a flower on its stalk; her eyes were large, dark and luminous, her face pale, with great sweetness of expression, and the mourning that she wore heightened this effect. Seeing her black garments Nancy and Rick realized what they had known, but not thought of much: that the Countess Valtino had been widowed for two years.

"Rick and Nancy?" she said, advancing to them

with outstretched hands before they had time to speak, and with the prettiest possible little lengthening of the *a* in Nancy's name. "And I thought of you as still the little children I had seen! The little girl that I saw in New York with short hair and the small, pale face is gone. Riccardo, my cousin dear, I am so glad to see you!"

She bent and kissed Nancy and then Rick on both cheeks, still holding a hand of each. By this time both the girl and the boy were captivated by her.

"We are going to drive you to the inn, Countess Valtino," said Rick. "Will you please come this way, where we left the horse?"

"Willingly," said the countess. "But, Riccardo! Countess Valtino? Where, then is Cousin Bianca? And to Nancy, too, I will be cousin, for why should we make a difference? She and Rick are as brother and sister."

"Oh, thank you," said Nancy, her eyes dark and soft with fervent admiration. "It's lovely in you to have come from so far, yet now to be so near."

"Oh, my little damsel!" said Madam Valtino, greatly pleased, for she had her race's appreciation of the poetical, and Nancy and she were affinities from the first. "That was a dear speech."

Rick and Nancy glanced at each other with

pleased amusement. It was their first experience of what they were to learn, that the Countess Valtino often used quaint English words, partly because she translated literally from the Italian, partly because she had learned the tongue from the study of English poets.

The countess was greatly pleased with the inn, though it did not strike her as being so venerable as it did the young Americans, to whom its something above a century and a half constituted a great old age. But its homeliness, in the English sense, its comfort, its simplicity appealed to her at once, and Mrs. Halleck's salutation of "Mrs. Valtino" sent the laughter into her shadowy eyes and set a dimple in her left cheek.

"You will stay to sup with me, please, dears?" said the new cousin.

"Not to-night, Cousin Bianca," said Rick. "Thank you very much. I must drive Nancy home. After supper, unless you are tired, Doctor Porter and Mrs. Porter told us to say that they would have the pleasure of calling upon you."

"Ah, but drive the dear Nancy home, if she must go, and return to sup with me, Riccardo!" pleaded the countess. "Is it far? I shall not want to take supper alone, with my kinsman so near."

"It is not far; I shall be glad to come, thank you, Cousin Bianca," said Rick.

"He has the manners of a prince!" thought the countess, delighted to find the boy what he was. "And beautiful! As if he had been carved by Donatello!" But all that she said aloud was: "Then I will wait for you. Hasten, Riccardo. And you, dear little Nancy, will you come with your parents? For I shall want you constantly."

The young people drove home quite delirious over the Italian cousin.

"Mother, father, she is heavenly!" "Well, sir, my Cousin Bianca is a peacherino all right!" they cried together, as they entered the library.

CHAPTER XIII

DORIS' BUGLE CALL

S she nice, Nancy?" asked Mimi Hunt with breathless interest the next day.

Nancy was mounting her latest snapshots in her photograph book, seated at the old desk that Warren had once used. She looked up at Mimi, replying first in silence with her eyes, which eloquently said what her lips repeated in an instant.

"Nice is no word for her at all," Nancy said emphatically. "She's perfectly lovely! She speaks English well, and not only that, but so that it sounds like poetry. Her voice is like maple syrup, with a queer little tang that vibrates —"

"As if the maple syrup was working?" suggested Mimi irreverently.

"Mimi," said Nancy reproachfully, "when you know her you'll never feel like making fun of her. I never saw any one so much like a poem — you wait!"

"Pretty?" asked Mimi.

"Ye-es!" cried Nancy. "Only that's like calling her nice — it's not the word at all. She's like a picture moving about, so graceful — "

"I do not think that a picture moving about would be graceful," declared Mimi, with a twinkle. "The frame would bump into everything, and it would sort of hitch-hump along as best it could. It wouldn't be graceful."

"If you're going to make fun of every word I say I'll go back to sticking," said Nancy, fulfilling her threat as she made it.

"I guess you're stuck yourself, stuck on Rick's cousin!" laughed Mimi. "It's a case, I see that. It's fun to tease you, Nancy, when you get so dead earnest. Your eyes go all in and out as you talk."

"Oh, Mimi, for pity's sake!" cried Nancy, laughing. "What do you mean? Think of eyes going in and out! I should think I'd look like one of those gutta-percha faces you squeeze."

"You always look like something to squeeze," declared Mimi, illustrating her statement by hugging Nancy on the spot. "I mean the pupils of your eyes spread all over the coloured part — "

"Iris," murmured Nancy.

"Those are the things a doctor's daughter is sup-

posed to know," said Mimi, unabashed. "Then they sort of run back, and out they go again! They always do that when you get terribly in earnest. I love to watch them. Here comes Doris; she looks in a hurry."

"I suppose she's coming to find out about the countess, too," said Nancy.

But Doris was not, or only incidentally. She asked the questions that Mimi had asked, but was not nearly as much interested in the replies; plainly Doris had something on her mind.

As soon as Nancy finished telling her, as she had told Mimi, how graceful, charming, beautiful, and interesting the Italian new-comer was, Doris got its burden off of her mind.

"Girls," she said with suppressed excitement, "you know I get fearfully exasperated with Aunt Augusta and her strict ideas."

"You surely do!" agreed Nancy and Mimi emphatically.

"Yes, and they are maddening. But I was thinking about myself last night after I went to my room, and I was thinking what a poor sort of a girl I was, anyhow, and that, up to a certain point, Aunt Augusta was right," said Doris gloomily.

"Father would say you needed something for

your digestion," laughed Nancy. "If ever I get too conscientious that's what he tells me, and mother says there isn't anything worse for a growing girl than to dwell long and dismally on her own character; she says the only thing to do is to do things, big and little ones, just as they come along each day, and not stop to consider such an unimportant person as one's self." Nancy quoted her father and mother with certainty that what they said settled any question, and also with an enjoyment of their manner of saying things.

Doris refused to be diverted. Once in a while she had attacks of this sort, and it amused Mimi, especially, to see her immense seriousness — not Miss Augusta Clark herself could take a more relentless view of duty than Doris did when she had what Nancy laughingly called "an awakening."

"It's altogether different," Doris persisted. "You do things, Nancy; you always did, but now you are everything to your father and have a beautiful work in the world to fulfil — that's what our minister's wife said about it yesterday, when she was calling on Aunt Augusta."

"Is that what started you off?" asked Mimi irreverently.

"She was talking about rich lives, lives that gave

out strength and help," said Doris. "She talked beautifully, so now, Mimi Hunt! It made me think. I don't see what you and I do in the world; our lives aren't helpful, we don't do a thing to make the world better."

"My mother enjoys having me for her daughter, so does my father, and even the boys like me, though nobody would suspect it from the way they act," Mimi justified her own existence with her invariable common sense.

"And your lives haven't been so very, very long, Doris," added Nancy. "Maybe you'll do more for the world when you've been longer in it."

Doris disregarded the comments of her friends. "I went up-stairs and read my calendar quotation for yesterday — I hadn't read it before — and what do you think it was?" she asked significantly.

"'How doth the little busy bee?'" suggested Mimi.

"'Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime?'" said Nancy.

"Oh, stop!" cried Doris pettishly. "The way that calendar fits is perfectly wonderful."

"I know; they always do," said Nancy. "I had a daily one once, and it was awful. I used to lift up the leaves 'way ahead when I wanted to know what

was going to happen on a certain day, or find out how something was going to turn out. I really got to looking at it as if it were a prophet."

"Well, what did your calendar say, Doris?" asked Mimi.

"It said: 'May I reach that purest heaven, be to other souls the cup of strength in some great agony. George Eliot,'" Doris quoted impressively, giving quotation and author in one breath, so that the effect was funny.

"Well?" said Mimi interrogatively, for Nancy, with the sense of humour which was her inheritance and the result of her training, had gone off into peals of laughter, her head down on her arms over the desk.

"Well, don't you see how it fitted?" demanded Doris. "Wasn't I just thinking how useless I was? So I sat down by the window, and looked at the great, solemn stars, and thought it all the more. I resolved to begin to amount to something this day — and you two have got to help me."

"How?" inquired Mimi sensibly. "I don't know any soul in some great agony, do you? We couldn't go torture somebody in order to be a cup of strength afterward, so you've got to wait for the agony to come naturally. Besides, I'm not sure

you or I could be a cup of strength, Doris. Nancy's different; she's been the doctor's assistant so long she's trained to being cups — strengthening, too."

"Oh, my gracious!" cried Doris, tears of annoyance in her eyes, for it is trying to come from one's private mountain tops into such exceedingly plain plains as these in which Mimi seemed to take her stand. "Can't you see? That quotation only showed me I was meant to do something for people, just as I was thinking; it didn't mean anything great, at first, anyway."

Doris was not too lucid, but Mimi met her half way. "You took it as a leading, the way people open their Bible to be shown what to do. Grandma Emerson says she often has done that and got light on a puzzle," said Mimi.

"That's it!" cried Doris, cheering up. "But I don't want to begin alone."

"What did you want us to do?" asked Nancy, sitting up again and drying her eyes, perceiving that Doris had a plan formed.

"I thought we might go with some nice things and give Lydia Slocum sort of a surprise party," said Doris promptly. "We neglect her, and she is certainly sorely afflicted."

"I'm not one bit sure she'd like it," said Nancy.

"I'm pretty sure she wouldn't," added Mimi. "Though Cord would."

"She ought to like it," said Doris, unconsciously taking the attitude that many older people hold in regard to their good works, that they should be appreciated by their object, however unwelcome they might be. "If we just went and cheered her up, and clubbed together to bring her flowers, and took some fruit, or some jelly — if your mother or Mimi's would give it; I wouldn't dare ask Aunt Augusta — why in the world shouldn't Lydia Slocum be pleased — when she's a cripple?"

"Because she's perfectly cranky about taking favours, and she's worse about having young people come in and track up her floor. She'd be sure to suspect we made an excuse to come to see Cord," objected Mimi. "She wouldn't like it a speck."

"She ought to," said Doris, with a frown that came from perplexity, but gave her the look of one who would give Lydia Slocum pleasure no matter how much Lydia hated it.

"Now I'll tell you, Mimi," interposed Nancy. "If Doris has heard the bugle call of duty we may as well let her march to it, for she'll never be satisfied till she does. Don't you remember other times when she's been roused up? We've got to help her

be noble till she gets over it. Mother will give us jelly, Doris, or I'll make some gelatine wine jelly — oh, my goodness, no, I can't! I forgot that Lydia's always talking about not looking on the wine when it's red! Of course gelatine lemon jelly, with sherry in it is yellow, but that wouldn't make her eat it. I might make some orange jelly, with enough lemon juice in it to give it more flavour, and put some cherries and nuts in the bottom of the mould. They look so ornamental when they're turned out on the top of the jelly hill. You can't make that sort for a sick person, because it's indigestible, but Lydia Slocum hasn't anything wrong with her, except being crippled."

"Pretty nearly enough," remarked Mimi. "All right, then; we'll start you on your way to being — what was it? — a cup of strength?"

"Thanks," said Doris, brightening. "And I mean to keep it up. I do not mean to sink back into a thoughtless, selfish girl again; I am quite old enough to amount to something. Aunt Augusta is right as far as that."

"When shall we go?" asked Nancy, refraining from comment on this announcement.

"I thought that we could go to-morrow," said Doris. "In the afternoon. If you want to make

that jelly, Nancy, it certainly would look pretty; I'll cut the blossom off my Andrew Lang geranium — it has a beauty bunch now! — to lay beside the jelly. And I thought, if you would, we'd club together and buy some flowers, not many, but some, to take her."

"No fear of their being many if we get them with our spending money, at the price flowers are at this time of year," said practical Mimi, with her jolly laugh. "But I'm willing."

"You are awfully nice chums," said Doris gratefully, relieved to find that her friends were ready to speed her on the way to sainthood, and to smooth her path. "I'll call for you, Nancy, and we'll go on to get Mimi, at half past one to-morrow. It's such a long walk that we must start early."

"We'll be ready," agreed Nancy. "I'll make the jelly this afternoon, so that it will 'jell,' as Letty Hetty always says."

The next afternoon Doris appeared primly correct as to dress, as she always was, but with an expression that indicated that she did not set out upon her higher life with any sense of elation. Aunt Augusta had wanted her to hem a new lot of kitchen towels, and had released her from the task only because Doris explained that she and her

friends were going charitably to visit Lydia Slocum. Even then Miss Clark implanted a sting by suggesting that "charity began at home," and that good works at the price of neglected duties had no right to be considered good. So, like many another, poor Doris found reality different from her dream, and set off feeling condemned instead of applauded.

Nancy was ready with her jelly turned out into a deep dish, a model beautiful to behold, with red cherries, and golden brown nuts, and slices of orange crowning the transparent yellow of its top.

Doris laid her geranium blossom, a perfect crimson with a suffused white heart, beside the jelly, and brightened as she beheld the effect.

"I've taken my week's allowance, so if you and Mimi want to give yours, we'll buy some flowers on our way," said Doris, as they started out.

Mimi was awaiting them with a cake. "It was the only thing that mamma or I could think of; it will go well with your jelly," she explained. "I brought along some money, so if you want to get flowers we can, but what Lydia Slocum will say to us, I don't know."

"I suppose one ought not to act in the hope of thanks," said Doris loftily, having recovered her spirits somewhat in the actual assembling of so

many instruments of pleasure for the crippled woman.

At the flower shop they found the stock low, and the flowers that remained were expensive.

"We had a wedding order over at North Chagford yesterday," explained the attendant. "They took almost all our flowers that were cheapest; it was not a wealthy family. We get a fresh lot in to-morrow. What can I show you?"

That was precisely what the girls were anxious to know. Roses were a dollar and a quarter a dozen — and they had seventy-five cents between them. Carnations were five cents apiece, and they were a weary looking pitcherful of untidy blossoms, with bursting calices, which the girl produced from the icebox for the inspection of her discouraged young customers.

"Let's take the best of them," said Nancy. "And some ferns and mignonette — have you mignonette? Then anything fragrant — and perhaps a rose or two. Would that be too much?"

"I'll let you have ten of the best of the carnations for forty cents; if you bunch them up they won't show they're bursting out. And I'll put in some green for ten, and give you three roses, nice ones, half opened, for a quarter, seeing it's for Doc-

"AT THE FLOWER SHOP THEY FOUND THE STOCK LOW."

tor Porter's girl. He saved my mother's life last summer, and I'd like to oblige you," said the girl.

Nancy tried not to think that this reduction in over-blown carnations, and a reduction of five cents on three roses was not a great return for saving one's mother's life. She thanked the girl, and the flowers were wrapped in paraffine paper, and then in white wrapping paper, paid for, and the girls went on their way.

It was a long walk out to the Slocums' little house, and the roads were muddy in the thaw. Three pairs of heavily coated overshoes came up the Slocums' steps on six tired feet at last. Cord threw open the kitchen door — the action allowed the girls to see her on her knees scrubbing the floor, for the kitchen was directly in line with the front door, which stood open.

"Whatever brought you here to-day, of all days?" Cord called out, at the same time telling them by a lively pantomime that she was talking for the benefit of those in the living-room. "We're cleaning up to-day to beat the band. I haven't time to talk to you, and I can't go out with you. Why didn't you come to-morrow?"

"We didn't come to see you, Cordie; we came to see Miss Lydia," said Nancy, understanding that

the fever for cleaning to which they were subject had attacked the Slocums severely that day, and that Cord didn't want to be suspected of anything so out of harmony as inviting visitors.

"Oh, did you? Well, you know where to find her. Mercy's just finishing the sitting-room. Go on in. But, for goodness' sake, take off your rubbers on the porch, or we'll have to begin all over again."

The girls obediently deposited their rubbers in a neat, or, more correctly, a precise row on the porch, and entered the little house, knocking despondently on the sitting-room door, for, though Lydia and Mercy must have heard the conversation, they made no sign.

"Come in!" said Lydia's crackling voice. "For the land sakes, children, what you want here to-day? We're up to our ears in work, or Mercy and Cord are. I'm sort of suggestin'; it's all I can do now, but Mercy needs it."

Nancy kept back a smile. Suggesting, to use Lydia's mild term, had always been her strong point.

Nancy and Mimi looked at Doris. If she had persuaded them there to begin her life work of being "a cup of strength in some great agony," she

might prove some of that strength by explaining why they had come.

"We came, Miss Lydia," said Doris firmly, but with quaking heart, "to see if we couldn't bring you a little pleasure. We thought the days must be long to you, and that perhaps you'd like, that maybe we could — well, cheer you up."

Mercy, on her knees dusting under the whatnot, sat back on her heels at this, and stared over her glasses at the girls in sheer amazement.

"For the land sakes!" exclaimed Lydia. "And I've been bed-ridden fully four years!"

"Yes, I know," said Doris, gaining courage. "That's what makes it so sad. I've been careless not to come before. I'd like to come — I will come —" Doris was scrupulously truthful to the finest point of accurate statement — "every day, or three times a week, and read to you. And we can sing, we three, if you'd like us to, and we'll tell you everything that has happened in town, as far as we've heard."

"For the land sakes!" exclaimed Lydia once more. "Don't you suppose I can read, child? And if there's anything happens in town that Cord Tilden doesn't hear of it must happen in the trees, among the birds, or else among the moles underground.

And I'd have a conniption fit if you sat there singin', and that's the truth. Do you suppose I want to feel's if I was a heathen and you a missionary band?"

"I didn't say hymns," murmured poor Doris. "But, of course, we'd much rather not sing. At any rate, we've brought you some little things — " She really could not go on, for Lydia glared at her, hating favours beyond expression.

Mimi, pitying Doris, produced her cake. Nancy, sorry for Doris, too, but inwardly convulsed, uncovered her jelly, with its geranium blossom, its cherries and nuts.

"What under the canopy possessed you? Doris Clark, are you goin' to grow up like Augusta? And Miriam Hunt, you are generally sensible. And as to you, Nancy Porter, you know I don't want people bringin' things here. I ain't sick, and I can't make anything for anybody in return. I don't believe in bein' beholden. I suppose you can't take that cake and jelly back again. Mercy and Cord like sweet stuff, but I don't want you should bring things here. They can cook all I need, and more. What's that?" she added, as Doris slowly unwrapped the flowers.

"We got you some flowers," said Doris faintly.

"Flowers! Bought 'em! In winter when they cost 's much as something useful! Well, those you

can take right along home with you, for that I don't approve of. I'd like to know what's got into you girls, anyway! And if I so much as have a bunch of laylocks in the house in May-time, which I'd like because they smell so good, John Jacob Astor goes and pulls 'em out, and gets the water all over everything. I never can have a flower in the house," declared Lydia.

"John Jacob Astor?" repeated Mimi curiously.

"The cat," explained Mercy, whose favourite he was. "Doctor Porter named him John Jacob Astor, because he made his living in furs, he said."

"So you take the flowers away," continued Lydia. "I don't want 'em. And don't spend your money foolishly, or you'll want when there's something wise to get. And don't come here to read to me, because it makes me want to fly to be read to. You needn't come to entertain me, either. I'd like to know what got into you three! Once in a while you may come to see Cord, but I tell you straight out I'd ruther you wouldn't do it when it's so muddy. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," echoed the girls, turning to go on this strong hint, Doris quite overcome, Mimi irritated with Doris for persuading her on this errand of mercy, with herself for being persuaded when she

foreknew the result, Nancy in inward convulsions of laughter.

Cord came to the door to see them off. "You must be crazy. What's up, anyhow?" she whispered. "Good-bye, can't talk, don't dare. I'll see you later."

The walk back was exceedingly long. Nancy laughed till she could laugh no more, and infected Mimi with her merriment. But Doris stalked on, disgusted, offended, crestfallen. The girls knew that they should hear no more about her nobler life.

As they parted at Miss Clark's gate Nancy said: "Don't you care, Doris! The bugle call of duty never sounds retreat, though this looks like it."

CHAPTER XIV

AN ITALIAN INTERLUDE

ANCY was giving a tea. It was Washington's Birthday, which was also funny little Cord's birthday, and, with the delightful democracy of Chagford, Nancy was asking her friends to meet formally the Countess Valtino. At the same time she was celebrating Cordelia Tilden, who was nobody whatever, judged by any accepted standard, and the birthday of the Father of his Country.

All the girls had met Rick's cousin informally, and, in a figurative sense, she may have been said to have walked on a pavement of girlish hearts, laid down before her feet exactly in the order of her meeting their owners. Every girl of Nancy's acquaintance had fallen prostrate before the charms of Rick's cousin Bianca. One was the victim of her great dark Italian eyes, another of her grace, an-

other of her smile, another of the pensive sweetness that her mourning gave her, but each one had succumbed additionally to her charm and to her accent, while Amabel secretly felt that the potent spell of her title, and of her residence in "the Villa Blanca," presumably named for its owner, near Florence, in Italy, added the last touch to her perfections. Every girl of them all, even the Coggs with their stalwart sense and free-and-easy ways, were desperately smitten by this lovely lady. In secret they practised a broad, soft *a*, and an indescribable hiatus in the middle of their words, which were the salient points in the countess' speech, and which they all considered fascinating — nor were they wrong.

So now that Nancy had invited them all to meet the lady of their delight at a formal tea, the girlish heart of Chagford was stirred to its depths.

By this time Nancy and Rick were entirely at home with the stranger, a stranger no longer. Her room at the Chagford Inn, pretty and cozy as it was, saw her but little. She had slipped into the Porter home like one of its nearest of kin. This was never a difficult thing to do, because the Porters and the Porter house were always ready to share their best, but Cousin Bianca was quite as ready to be made a friend of as they were to receive her.

The doctor brushed up his rusty Italian with her, and spent happy hours hearing her read Dante, or Goldoni, for the sweet Italian was full of unspoken sympathy for his misfortune and accounted it a favour to be allowed to help to while away one of his darkened days.

Mrs. Porter, full of love herself, gave herself up readily to Cousin Bianca's affection, and yielded her confidences that she was not given to making. Cousin Bianca was of that delightful age that made her one with Nancy's mother and one with her daughter; she was still young, yet past thirty, so that she seemed to have the good of all periods of life at once.

As to Nancy, if the other girls admired and were fascinated by the countess, she worshipped her with all the enthusiasm of a nature prone to hero — and especially to heroine — worship. She had been devoted to Louise with the devotion of a little girl for a big one, but the countess was like a being from another world to romantic Nancy, a world farther and more mysterious than Italy.

"I am so afraid she will find the afternoon tiresome," Nancy was saying anxiously, as she buttoned her mother's princess gown in the back, and then dropped like a Turk, cross-legged on the carpet be-

fore her, to have her long dark braids pinned across her head just above her neck. Nancy's hair, cut short when she was nearly eleven and had scarlet fever severely, had grown into an abundance of length and thickness that she found trying to deal with.

"Why, dear? I think your adopted cousin seems sincerely to enjoy our simple home life," said Mrs. Porter.

"There'll be so many girls, and they are all so crazy about her that she may wish there were more grown people," said Nancy.

"The Misses Allaire, Grandma Emerson, Miss Drummond, Dean Okley, Louise, with her diamond pledge that she is fully grown, and your father and I — oh, that's a respectable number of adults, Nancy!" laughed Mrs. Porter. "But I suspect the Cousin Bianca of enjoying the girls quite as well. I know that she thinks the Coggs and Cord most remarkable specimens of Young America, and never tires of trying to understand them and label them correctly in her mind, much as if they were some new sort of insects."

"She must think we are very different," said Nancy dubiously.

"Nancy, dear, don't be an anxious little goose!"

cried her mother. "The Cousin Bianca is far too intelligent, and what in her own tongue would be called *simpatica,* to misunderstand. If we weren't 'different' what would be the use of travelling so far to see us? We should find Italy 'different,' too! Countess Valtino says that she never realized the force of American democracy till she came to Chagford. We are nearer the old ways than in the big cities, which alone she has seen in her previous visits to the States. She finds it interesting and charming, and is sorry when we tell her that it is vanishing fast; she says our kindly equality is the only consistent manner of living in a republic. So don't worry about her meeting Dean and Cord, dear, and never fall into an apologetic attitude of mind for home ways. Run along and get your gown on; your guests will be here before their hostess is ready."

Nancy departed and was quite ready before the first guest arrived. She proved to be Doris, who, when she saw Nancy in her gown of a soft, faded pink, exclaimed with pleasure: "Oh, Nancy, how sweet you do look! That's the most becoming dress you ever had. Why don't you oftener wear pink, Nancy?"

"I don't know; I suppose it's because I've got

into the way of being a blue Nancy," replied Nancy. "You look nice, too, Doris. I never saw you in that warm, dark red before, and how it does suit your dark hair!"

"Don't you know that your mother begged Aunt Augusta to give a kind of an indigo-plum-purple she had bought for me to a mission box and get me this instead? If it weren't for your father and mother, Nancy Porter, I'd as lief be dead," cried Doris.

"So would I," agreed Nancy. "Here come the Coggs in the car, with Elijah driving. Maizie won't drive herself when she's going to an afternoon tea, now-a-days."

"Oh, they've learned a lot," said Doris, as the big automobile stopped at the Porter gate and deposited Miss Drummond and the four Coggs girls, enveloped in long motoring coats and hoods, and bearing great bunches of white tissue paper.

"We brought you flowers, Nancy darling," said Daisy, entering in advance of her sisters. "The green house is just bursting with 'em now. One of us has carnations, another violets, another ferns, another roses, and we let Rhoda Drummond carry the orchids because she's the oldest and most elegant one of our crowd. We'd like to have you put

the flowers around for your party, and then, if you didn't mind, give her the orchids to take to the inn."

"I'd like to, but I've an idea she would want some of the roses, too, if they're the Killarneys which were in bud the last time I was up," said Nancy. "Here she comes: Rick went after her." The feeling for the Countess Valtino among the girls was at such a point that "she" and "her" meant but one person then.

While the guest of honour was up-stairs with Mrs. Porter, in the informal manner of receiving her which suited the occasion, Louise and Amabel arrived with Mimi, Grandma Emerson with her bodyguard, Dean Okley and the Misses Allaire drove up, bringing Cord, whom they had met on the way, so that the countess came down to find all her new American friends assembled.

"This is really the Countess Valtino's party, not mine," said Nancy. "She is going to tell us about Italy, or about that part of Italy which she owns, her Villa Blanca. Will you please sit here, Cousin Bianca? Right in the middle of the circle in front of the fire? And, girls, we are going to take these cushions and make a ring around her, sitting on the floor, then nobody will be nearest, and we can listen better if we don't sit in chairs."

"That's the way!" cried Cord, the irrepressible, instantly dropping on one of the cushions that Nancy was strewing on the floor. "My, but it's fun to lop around!"

The pretty Italian laughed. "But make it a half circle, Nanciata, please! I could never bear to talk to girls behind my back," she said, not intending a jest.

"We say: 'Talk *of* girls behind *their* backs!'" cried Taizie Coggs, and the countess looked puzzled.

"I'd like to know just where your villa is, Countess Valtino," said Grandma Emerson. "Dean and I were studying a map of Florence last night."

"It is south of the city, dear lady," said the countess, in her soft voice, with the accent that Nancy and her friends found the prettiest speech that they had ever heard. "It stands on a hill — you noticed that there are mountains there? From the windows one sees the Arno slowly going toward the sea. Olive trees there are, growing by the villa; there is a grove of them where I love to sit and read. I play that Dante used to come there and dream of Beatrice, and mourn that Florence was unkind to him."

"You say Bay-ah-tre-che; we say Beatrice," said

Mimi, then was horrified to find that she had been so interested that she had spoken.

"Yes. One is the English, the other the Italian fashion of speaking. We pronounce each vowel," smiled the countess.

"And sort of run words up in the middle and then let them slide down again," added Hazie Coggs, who had been trying the new pronunciation under her breath.

The countess laughed so heartily that it was a great relief to Nancy, who felt anxious about these comments.

"Here are my photographs of Florence and of Tuscan," said the doctor, offering their guest a portfolio. "They may be yellowing; I brought them home with me before Nancy was born, some years before. Perhaps they will help you make these children — of all ages! — understand better your beautiful home."

"Thank you," said Rick's cousin. "I will try. Some of you have been there?" she asked.

"We were there five years ago," said Amabel eagerly. "But I was not old enough to appreciate the galleries."

"We should not be wise enough to-day," added Louise. "But there is hope of my seeing Florence

again next year." She smiled and blushed, and quickly added: "The Misses Allaire and Doctor and Mrs. Porter know your heavenly Tuscany."

"Ah, that it is! My heavenly Tuscany!" cried the countess. "When the moonlight falls on the black olive trees and lights up the hills, and turns the Arno into a silver thread, and I look from the white walls of the villa into the deep shadows, then over to Fiesole, and toward Assisi, and think of how Fra Angelico came out of Fiesole to bring heaven down upon the monastery walls in Florence, and how San Francisco at Assisi brought heaven still nearer by his holiness and love, I think all beauty, of art, and nature, and heart and soul are within my vision from my hillside!"

"Oh!" sighed Nancy and Rick together, instantly enkindled by the picture.

But Doris was interested in the tangible things of the stranger's life.

"Your house is white, is it?" she asked. "With green blinds?" she added.

The countess' lips twitched. "No, dear," she said gravely. "It is not painted, you know. It has not your shady green blinds of New England; it is a stone house."

"Marble?" cried Cord, awe-struck.

"Yes, little dark elf; they brought the marble down from the north long years ago. Some of it is yellowed, some of it still quite white, for the villa was not built all at once," said the countess.

"I'll bet it's big!" cried Daisy Coggs accusingly.

"It is large for one lady to live in alone, and she not much more than a wand," said the countess. "This makes me say something that I have been wanting to say to our dear doctor and his wife, but I had not quite courage. I think I will say it now, with you all to hear and champion me. Are you all very, very fond of my little cousin?"

"Rick? Well, rather!" cried Maizie Coggs.

"Rick is quite superior to the other boys of Chagford. I think it is because he is better born, and is so wonderfully talented," said Amabel.

Nancy remembered how Amabel had taken pains to show her scorn of this superior boy when he had come, friendless and poor, to Chagford, but she was too frightened by this introduction to the countess' remarks to be tempted to smile over the remembrance that flitted through her mind.

"I know how dear he is to his devoted friends in this house," said Rick's cousin gently. "But I want Rick! When I asked him to come to me

before, I had but seen him afar; now I know him. I came to America for this purpose. And I have heard Rick play. I find his talent greater, even, than I had believed it from the accounts given me by these dear people in their letters. I want Riccardo to come to Italy with me to live, if not forever, at least for as long as he will stay. I want him to study his music there, under the masters that I can give him. I want his poetic mind to learn the land of his mother's race. Rick would love Italy and Italy would love Rick! Above all I want Rick for myself. I am alone. And whenever the dear Porters would follow him, they and this sweet Nancy especially, would be more welcome than the spring when it brings the melon flower in the Val d'Arno. What will my cousin say? And what do you all say to his going back with me to my heavenly Tuscany, as you truly called it, Miss Willis?"

A silence fell on the room as the countess ceased speaking. Rick leaned forward to mend the fire and to hide his face.

"We will never ask Rick to do anything that is not best for him," said the doctor at last. "It would be foolish to pretend that it would not cost us a pang to give up the dear lad. He is like a

son to me, and more than many sons and brothers to Mrs. Porter and Nancy, but I see plainly that Rick would gain much in going with you, Madonna Bianca, and we will never try to hold him in this sleepy little village."

"It sounds simply great!" exclaimed Maizie Coggs, who had been spellbound by the soft voice, soft speech and poetical descriptions of that Tuscan villa.

"Rick would find his horizon wonderfully expanded," added Miss Dorinda Allaire.

"And Rick says?" breathed the countess bending toward the boy.

"Rick says that it isn't patriotic to talk about leaving the States on Washington's birthday — and Cordie Tilden's birthday!" cried the boy, springing up with a face so crimson that it was not hard to see that if he had been a girl tears might have come. "I'm awfully grateful, Cousin Bianca. While you were talking I felt as though I'd fly right across the ocean and light in one of your olive trees. Some day I'll get there! You don't want me to answer you this minute? I must tell you a good deal when I do answer."

"Surely, Riccardo mio, you shall not reply to me at once. I wished that all these kind friends

should know what was in my mind, so that when you asked of them advice they would know what you were considering," said the countess gently. "Now, may we have our music?"

Nancy's hands had been fluttering in and out of each other, her cheeks were crimson, but she put away from her the terror that had gripped her when she heard what seemed to her Rick's almost irresistible invitation. She arose to do her duty as hostess. "The Countess Valtino has promised to sing Italian folk songs to us; Rick has learned her accompaniments," she said. "The first is a little Florentine love song, and she says that it has been handed down for so many, many years that perhaps Dante heard the girls singing it when he first saw Beatrice coming along the street in her crimson gown."

Rick had brought his violin from the corner and was softly trying its strings. He played the prelude of the old Florentine song; a quaint, haunting melancholy ran through its brightness. The countess had a slight voice, not strong, nor of great range, but it held the musical feeling of her race. It had a quality that suited perfectly the songs she now sang, one after the other, sitting quietly before the fire, her long, slender hands

folded in her lap, her lovely expressive face changing with the changes in her songs.

Not only the adoring girls, but the older people were spell-bound by her music. Nancy struggled at first against its charm. "Rick will never be able to resist going with her," she thought. "She is more irresistible than the Pied Piper of Hamlin; he can't help following her." And the singing proved the truth of her thought, for in a short time Nancy was enthralled by the music. Her delicate face was aglow with the pleasure of it, her cheeks flushed, her eyes dark and luminous.

The countess watched the girl as she sang. "She is all spirit and heart," she thought. "My Riccardo will never be able to leave this lovely little comrade; I shall not win him."

So the Cousin Bianca and Nancy, each in her way and for a different reason, felt sure that Rick would be lost to her.

Letty Hetty appeared in the doorway, making frantic signals to Nancy to follow her, signals which Mrs. Porter saw and responded to first, though Nancy soon caught them and ran out to look over the table which Letty Hetty had prepared.

It was set under a great flag, draped almost all the way across the dining-room ceiling. Little flags

waved at each place, a red, white and blue iced cake adorned the middle of the table. Small hatchets with their handles full of candy were tied with red, white and blue ribbons to each chair. Indian meal mush and milk was to be the first course in memory of that classic song:

> "Father and I went down to camp
> Along with Captain Goodwin,
> And there we saw the men and boys
> As thick as hasty pudding."

There was a salad in which had been hidden slips of paper bearing the names of Revolutionary battles. Whoever received one of these slips must tell something about the battle which fell to his share, or pay a forfeit.

Chicken and chocolate were interpreted liberally to belong to almost any period, and there was tea which, Nancy had said, must be drunk only with the Boston Tea Party in mind. When the solid part of these refreshments had been eaten Letty Hetty would serve her famous ice cream, frozen in small moulds in the shape of Continental soldiers.

"It's all perfectly beautiful, Letty Hetty; not a thing to alter," said Nancy. "Now light the thirteen candles, in honour of the thirteen original states, and I'll go fetch the guests." She ran back

to her new room where she had left her friends. "Please come and eat and drink in gratitude to the Father of our Country," she said. "And don't forget that Cordie is fourteen to-day. Rick, please play a march. And, father, dear, will you show the countess how nice a *nice* American escort can be?"

CHAPTER XV

BREAD ON THE WATERS

OTHING more was said of Rick's cousin's proposition to him, except that as she bade the boy good night the countess had reminded him of it in parting from him at the door of the inn, whither he had escorted her.

"Remember, dear boy," she said, "that I shall be anxious for your decision, but I will not ask you for it until you have taken all the time you need to be quite sure of your own mind."

"I am sure of it now, Cousin Bianca," said Rick. "But I want you to let me tell you just how I feel and why I feel that way, and that will take a little time."

"Oh, Riccardo, please do not say that you already have made up your mind!" pleaded his cousin. "I am sure that it would not mean anything favourable

to my hopes if you could decide on the instant. Let us take time and thought for it, Rick, dear! I truly feel certain that it would be good for you to go to Italy with me — and you cannot know how I want you! I am not going to ask for your answer for a week!"

The week went by without any one's broaching the subject. None of the Porters alluded to it, though Nancy could not help speaking of it with her eyes, if that were speaking; she was so eagerly anxious to hear Rick say that he would not leave them. The doctor and her mother had forbidden her to be the first to mention his going. They wanted to leave Rick to solve his problem freely, if it took the form of a problem to him; it was hard to imagine Rick, who had become so entirely one of themselves, seriously thinking of going so far away.

There came at the end of this week of uncertainty, a day that seemed to have been tossed like a golden ball backward from the hand of April. It was a day of soft winds, beguiling one into forgetfulness of winter; a day of sunshine, the odours of damp earth, of melting frosts, of the notes of the earliest birds, the song sparrow, the peewee, the bluebird and the chirky robin, jolliest and happiest of all in the promise this day held.

The Coggs' car stopped at the doctor's door early that morning with Stephen's brother Elijah driving, Elijah, the careful, whom the girls had at last learned not to call Mr. Riggs.

Maizie Coggs sprang out and ran up the walk as if she had a preference for flying, but considerately repressed it — slightly.

"I'm on an errand, I'm bringing you a message, you dear doctor's family!" she cried. "Miss Belinda says there's to be a meeting of the hospital committee at her house this afternoon, and you're all to come up there by twelve at the latest and take lunch on the south piazza. She says if the birds can lunch out doors there's no reason you shouldn't — that's what she told me to say. And the Countess Valtino is to come. I've got to go on from here to the inn and tell her. Then you'll be on hand for the meeting. They're going to decide what the entertainment is to be when the hospital opens. Miss Belinda says the serious part of it is in the hands of the governing board and she s'poses it will be as solid and good for you as pills and rostrums, so that's the more reason for making the entertaining part entertaining."

"Maizie, I recognize the fidelity of your quotations from Miss Belinda; they sound like her. But

I think she said nostrums, not rostrums, perhaps?" suggested the doctor.

"Maybe," agreed Maizie cheerfully. "But I had kind of an idea that rostrums had something to do with speeches. I'll never learn queer words; it's all — and more! — than I can do to keep the every-day words running straight."

"Nostrums are medicines, doses, but they don't matter when we are all so well, and the day so wholesome," laughed Mrs. Porter. "We'll be delighted to have an unseasonable picnic luncheon. Thanks for the message, Maizie, dear."

"No thanks to me!" said Maizie. "I had to come down anyhow. Taizie has a streak that calls for caramels. She's fairly crazy to get some caramels, so I came after them. Caramels are easier to get than a strait-waistcoat."

"Bad as that?" asked Rick. "You're a good sister, Maizie."

"I kind of wanted some buttercups myself," admitted Maizie. "And Hazie's sobbing for nougat. Daisy said she wouldn't care if she had some peanut brittle, and we made Rhoda Drummond own up that she had been hankering after soothing syrup candy — anise drops, but that's what we call 'em — for days. So I made up my mind I'd just come down

and lay in a stock of all sorts. Thank goodness for that new candy store!"

"I'll be up to-night about eleven, Maizie, professionally," said the doctor gravely.

"Not for us!" declared Maizie. "We don't slip our cogs for a pound of candy apiece!"

"Not now, but 'wait till you come to forty year,'" quoted the doctor.

"My! Think of the pounds we can eat before that!" cried Maizie triumphantly, and hugged Nancy hard and exuberantly before she flew off down the walk as fast as she had come. Then she turned and flew back again. "I forgot. Some of us will come down and take you up there, then the doctor won't have to bother with a horse," she added, and was gone, this time finally.

So it happened that Maizie herself, who dearly liked to run the big car, came down and took the Countess Valtino, Mrs. Porter and Nancy up to the stone house at noon, and that Rick found himself walking up with the doctor through the balmy, springlike day, which, but for the mud that made overshoes a necessity, might have been May day.

Doctor Porter was boyishly cheerful, enjoying the sunshine and sounds and odours of the out of doors as he especially could enjoy them, but it grieved

Rick to see him feeling for the curb with his foot and waiting to be told when he might safely cross a street. Once, when the boy saved him from collision with a baby carriage, the tears sprang into Rick's eyes and he spoke.

"Doctor Porter," he said, "I've been waiting to talk to you, sir, before I said anything to my cousin — about going to Italy, you know."

"Yes, Rick. Well?" said the doctor. "You know exactly how I feel about it, as I did when your cousin wrote to you suggesting your going some years ago. But you were a small lad then. Now you will soon be grown up. I want whatever is for your best good, my boy."

"Yes, sir; I know that," responded Rick. "But the question is: what is best for me? I've been wanting to ask you — Doctor Porter, I'd rather not study music!"

"Not study music, Richard? Why, you are music itself. What makes you say this?" cried the doctor, stopping short in his walk.

Rick was glad that the doctor could not see his face.

"Do you think that I could be a doctor, a good one? I wouldn't want to be any other sort. I've been wishing that I might study medicine. If you

think there's any chance of making a decent doctor out of me I'll never study music any more than I have — I know enough for my own pleasure — and I'll pitch in hard, here, not in Italy. Is there any chance, Doctor Porter?" asked Rick. He tried hard to make his voice and manner convincing, but the doctor was suspicious.

"Rick, Richie lad, what's your motive?" he asked, putting an arm across Rick's shoulder.

"I would rather be a good physician than a musician," said Rick truthfully. "I want to be one because it's the first of professions, to my mind. I'll never give up music, but I won't devote my life to it. I suppose you won't believe it's only that, so I may as well tell you that I'd also like to go along with you, studying, you know, and try to help with your practice, right here in Chagford."

"Richie, Richie! May God bless you, boy, for your devotion to me," said Doctor Porter huskily. "But I won't accept the sacrifice of a lad of sixteen."

"Doctor, it isn't a sacrifice!" cried Rick. "Honest truth, it isn't! I'd give my hand to know I could live right on with you and Mother Porter and sweet Nancy all my life and till I'm dropping with old age! If I could be a good doctor, and you'd

let me go on in that blessed old home, and carry on your work, wouldn't that be better than being a violinist? Just tell me if you think I could make a passably good doctor, and then take me for your medical student! Then good-bye Italy and all that, except for a visit between times. Doctor Porter, let me take up your work! Teach me, if you think I'm worth teaching! And if it gives you a little comfort to feel as if you had a son that was growing up into your place, do you think I could ever play any music that would be as beautiful to me as that?"

Tears stood in the doctor's darkened eyes; he was deeply moved at this proof of love in the boy whom he had learned to love as his own and to whom he had been more than most fathers to their sons. With the perception of a man he saw what this might mean in the years to come, and the thought of the happiness it might lead to kept him silent.

"I told Nancy about this weeks ago and she cried, she was so glad," said Rick.

"You told Nancy! And she never said one word to her mother or me!" cried the doctor. "Yet she was so glad, was she? Rick, dear, if I thought you could be happy so I have no words to tell you how glad I should be, too!"

"There's only one question, doctor: Am I fit to be a physician?" persisted Rick.

"I think you would make an extraordinary physician, Rick, with your sympathy, your perception, your violinist's long fingers, your tact in dealing with people — if only your music would not call and call to you, making you unfit for your work," replied the doctor, walking on.

"That settles it!" cried Rick. "I'm going to study; I'm going to hope to take your place some day, though never to fill it. And as to my music calling me — I shall never be so far from it that it will have to call me! And don't you believe there are things that call me fully as loud — Mother Porter, you — and Nancy?"

"Yes, Richard, I believe it. I will take you for my student and my successor, if all goes well," said the doctor solemnly. "And all must go well with such a devotion as yours. I have no words to tell you, Richie, what joy, what profound, grateful, peaceful joy you have given to me, my son."

"That's the word!" cried Rick, a trifle huskily. "If you'll just keep in mind that I'm your son, your boy Rick, who owes you more than he can repay, and loves you so well that nothing else but you and Mother Porter — and Nancy — matters, then you

won't talk about being grateful, Doctor-daddy — as Nancy calls you."

"I think you are more than my boy; you are my Bread upon the Waters, Rick," said the doctor.

"You were so long, so dreadfully long coming, you two little boys!" cried Nancy, going to meet her father and Rick as they came up the steps of the stone house. "Miss Belinda is cross and Miss Dorinda is worse! They think the tea will get cold and the lettuce will get warm, the breeze is so nice on the piazza and the sun so hot!"

"Nothing of the kind, Doctor Porter!" said Miss Dorinda, greeting these last arrivals. "Luncheon has not been brought out, but now that you are come, I will order it at once."

"We did not stop on our way, not even to play marbles with the other boys, Miss Allaire, though I leave it to any one who remembers youth if this isn't a day to suggest marbles? It's too warm to seem like a top day, though it's early, even for tops. We walked slowly, perhaps, talking, but I hope for mercy," said the doctor.

Nancy glanced quickly at her father, then at Rick. Her father looked stirred, but his smile and tone seemed to her warm with happiness. Rick's cheeks

were crimson, his eyes big and bright; he bore himself triumphantly, Nancy thought. He must have told the doctor his decision as to Italy!

Lunch on a piazza is always delightful, but when it is eaten there as early as the last of February — "not even leap year and the twenty-ninth," as Nancy said — it adds a great deal to the pleasure.

After it was over Miss Belinda led her guests to the drawing-room where she and Rick played to them, Rick with such fervent beauty that the doctor's conscience pricked him. For his sake — "and Nancy's," as Rick might have said — this gifted boy was going to fold his poetic wings and settle down to a small town's medical practice! Yet, after all, was not this living a harmony, a melody more beautiful than the violin could express? Nor would his violin be silenced.

The committee to consider the programme for the entertainment that was to celebrate the opening of the hospital assembled at the stone house soon after lunch; it consisted of twenty of Chagford's chief citizens — women citizens, old and young. Nancy drew Miss Belinda aside before the meeting began.

"Dear Miss Belinda," she said, "won't you get them to let Rick and me act a scene from Shake-

speare? Something that can be set simply? I perfectly hate to do it, but I want to."

"Nancy, are you going back to your Puritan ancestors?" asked Miss Belinda laughing. "I'd be delighted to have you and Rick recite a scene from one of the comedies, but what can inspire you to do what you hate?"

"My father," said Nancy promptly. "He'd be so interested in training us and so pleased. You know what quantities of Shakespeare he has taught me. He'd so love to have Rick and me do this that I want to, though I don't want to — don't you see? Will you manage it, please?"

"Certainly, I will, my doctor's daughter! If ever a child earned her title, it is you! What shall it be? 'As You Like It?' 'Comedy of Errors?' 'Merchant of Venice?' What?" asked Miss Belinda.

"The 'Merchant of Venice,' the Casket Scene, or else the Court Scene," said Nancy, betraying by her promptitude that she had considered her answer.

There was a babel of debate for a long time when the committee meeting got under way, as one after another proposition was offered, discussed, rejected, laid aside for further consideration, or at once accepted. It was unanimously carried that only Chag-

ford talent should supply that evening's programme. But it was also decided that the interpretation of this clause should be stretched to include the Countess Valtino, since she was staying at the Chagford Inn, for she had consented to sing Italian folk songs in the costume of a contadina, with Rick to play her accompaniments, also in peasant costume. The committee could not reject this offer.

When the programme was finally arranged it included songs, instrumental music, trios, duets, quartettes, and then Miss Belinda, chairman of the committee, announced that "Nancy Porter and Richard Lovering would give the Casket Scene *and* the Court Scene from 'The Merchant of Venice.' In costume," Miss Belinda added.

Nancy made her frantic signals, but Miss Belinda was conveniently preoccupied and ignored them.

"Oh, Miss Belinda, not both! I never said both, I didn't in the least mean both!" protested Nancy, aghast at the betrayal of her trust of which Miss Belinda had been guilty.

Miss Belinda's eyes twinkled mischievously at Nancy. "I thought I would give you a chance for two-fold merit," she said. "If you hate to recite one scene, you must doubly hate to recite two, so I was good to you and let you purchase two-fold

pleasure for your father by your own discomfort! Come, Nancy girl, don't look so horrified! It will really be easier to give two scenes than one. While you are reciting one you will be thinking how hard the other was — or is to be — so you will not mind the one you are doing at the time. Cheer up, sweetheart. It was a base trick, but I'm not one bit repentant; I know how well they will be done, and I am only public spirited, you see!"

"No, Maizie, thank you," the doctor was saying. "Mrs. Porter and I are going to walk home. Rick and his cousin are walking, and Nancy is going down with the girls, so your big car will not be needed, my dear, nor your ready kindness."

The truth was that the doctor was impatient to tell his wife of his talk with Rick, and Rick was anxious to tell his cousin of his decision and "to have it done with."

Nancy walked home with her own group of girls, Amabel, Mimi and Doris, all of whom had part in the coming hospital opening.

Two by two they walked, sometimes one pair ahead, sometimes the other, and whichever pair was ahead walked backward the better to say what must be said to those in the rear, for the four girls were as excited as wrens.

"To think that Louise will be gone when it all comes off!" sighed Nancy. "And she sings so well! It is too bad she isn't going to be married after the opening, instead of before."

"She will not mind," said Amabel. "She will be too happy to miss the entertainment."

"Nancy meant that the entertainment would miss her," explained Mimi needlessly. "But as to the wedding, I think Nancy has the best of it, better than Louise. Anybody'd rather be a bridesmaid than a bride. You have a lovely dress and are part of the procession, but everybody isn't criticizing you, and you aren't leaving your home, or making fearful promises, either!"

"Well," Nancy laughed, "that is one way to look at it, Mimi! I'm crazy to be bridesmaid to Louise. But I'm not one bit crazy to give two Shakespearean recitations — in costume; that means acting them. I'm crazy when I think of that, in another way!"

"You'll be all right," said Doris. "You always are. Your father will help you, so will your mother. And Rick will act like everything, I know. Is he going to Italy, Nancy?"

"I don't know," said Nancy. "He hasn't said one word, and I'm not to till he does." At that in-

stant Rick was saying his final words to his cousin at the door of the inn.

"Ah, Rick, Rick," the countess said. "I'm not so dull, my dear, as not to see! You want to do this beautiful thing, but it is a sacrifice!"

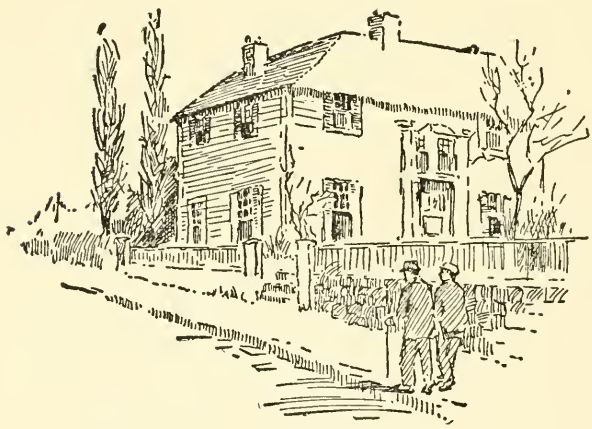
"No, Cousin Bianca, truly," said Rick, and his eyes showed her that he spoke from his heart. "There is a tiny spot in me that is just a little sore that I can't spend my life for my music and in it, and that I can't go with you to that lovely land, and know the people that my mother came from. But I am so glad, so glad that I can do something for the doctor, so delighted to be with him and his dear wife — she's like my mother, Cousin Bianca! — that the little spot is swallowed up and I don't feel it unless I poke around, hunting for it."

"And the sweet Nancy?" said Cousin Bianca.

"Oh, Nancy! I couldn't live without Nancy!" said Rick simply. "When I first saw her, when we were both little things, not eleven, we knew that we were friends the instant we met. Nancy and I made believe in just the same way. Don't you think, Cousin Bianca, that when people belong like that it is even more than being brothers and sisters? Nancy and I are the closest kin. I am awfully glad to stay, dear Cousin Bianca, though I've grown so

fond of you, and I'm sorry Italy and Chagford aren't one happy land."

"I haven't a word to say, Rick, not a word to say. I know that you are doing right. It is a beautiful right, dear child. Some day you and Nancy will come to me, perhaps. I wish you were my son, dear, and not my distant cousin — too far distant in miles!" said the Cousin Bianca, and kissed Rick's forehead very tenderly and wistfully.



CHAPTER XVI

NANCY IN ATTENDANCE

T'S come in like a lamb, so I s'pose we've got to look for it's goin' out like a lion," Letty Hetty was saying, leaning in an unwonted moment of idleness against the casement of the door. She was enjoying the attractive litter of the room; it looked like the afterglow of a June sunset, or like the traditional "bed of roses." Dean Okley was busily shirring more of the thin rose-coloured material that floated over the room, Mrs. Porter was sewing still more of it on the machine, and Nancy, in a kimono, her slender bare arms gleaming from its loose sleeves, was gathering lace as fast as her fingers could fly.

"If March will only forget how it came in, and what is said about it, and be gentle on the twenty-fifth!" said Nancy. "Louise says she is not allowed by the laws of the Medes and Persians to tell where she is going on her wedding journey, but I'm sure it will be South. If it is, it won't matter

to her if March does go out on the wind, or is cold in its last week. But I do hope the twenty-fifth will be lamblike!"

"Oh, well, it won't matter much if it ain't," said Letty Hetty cheerfully. "You'll be wrapped up warm, and they don't let the fire in the church out till May at least. What about your hat, Nancy? Hurry up, Dean, and try the dress on; I want to see it."

"They're waiting for me, Letty Hetty. Just as soon as I stitch these skirt seams Dean will pin the waist and skirt together on Nancy, and turn the hem," said Mrs. Porter, making her wheel fly. "Sit down; push that silk slip into its box and take its chair, Letty Hetty; you'll have to wait a few moments."

"My hat — the three bridesmaids' hats, and Althea Lawrence's — are getting made in Boston," said Nancy. "Althea is attending to them. She says they are going to look like big bonbonnières."

"What are Bonbunny airs? Anything like Gainsboroughs?" asked Letty Hetty. "They wore Gainsboroughs for fancy when I was your age. Candy boxes?" she exclaimed, as Nancy interpolated the word of explanation. "Oh, well! So will your whole get up look like candy. I never can decide

whether young girls dressed up like pictures look most like candy or perfumes — I guess it's both; those perfume candies! Jerusalem Halifax Gentleman! I hadn't ought to be settin' here! There's always enough to do, land knows. And those two kittens of Bumblebee's, Flip and Funny, have torn my kitchen tablecloth; I've got that to darn. By the way, where's Fred? I haven't seen him this long time."

Nancy lifted the end of a streamer of the rose-coloured material of her bridesmaid gown; there was Fred silently answering for himself, sound asleep in an empty box that had held part of the finery.

"Mother wanted to ask him to move, but I reminded her of the adage, 'let sleeping dogs lie,' so she's letting Fred lie," explained Nancy.

Fred opened one eye when he heard his name, sleepily, but kindly, wagged the tip of his tail, then went on with his nap.

"Now we can try on!" announced Dean, as Mrs. Porter snipped the thread of her last seam and tossed the skirt to the young sempstress and Grandma Emerson's bodyguard. Nancy divested herself of her kimono and Dean slipped the soft pink waist on her slender figure.

"It's to have something partly fichu, partly collar folded over the shoulders, with long ends that float over the skirt," Dean explained to Letty Hetty, speaking with difficulty from among the pins between her lips as she adjusted the skirt and began pleating it to the waist. "It's going to be pretty, Letty Hetty! Louise got the design from a Paris wedding costume. It's simple, youthful, yet striking."

"You see the lace wanders around on it and in it, and crops out when it wants to see the ceremony or improve it, Letty Hetty," said Nancy, waving her hands in curves around her own body by way of illustration.

"That sounds out of the ordinary anyhow," commented Letty Hetty with a laugh. "We'll have quite a slice of that wedding ourselves."

"With the Lawrences staying here, — and that means the groom, — and Nancy a bridesmaid! We shall, indeed, Letty Hetty. But how much we shall enjoy it! I feel as happily excited over it as Nancy does. And isn't it delightful to see the doctor's pleasure?" asked Mrs. Porter, dropping on her knees beside Dean to help her straighten the hem of Nancy's skirt.

"It's about as nice as it can be to see how the

doctor has chirked up all the time since Rick told him he wanted to stay with him and learn to take his practice. It's been the next thing to gettin' his eyes back, and I do hope the Lord will see that the boy gets paid good interest on his lovin' gratitude. I guess I've got an idea how that dress's goin' to look now, and I must go and take some steps toward dinner, or you won't have strength to walk up the aisle in it, carryin' your bouquet, Nancy. It's wonderful pretty, little girl, and I believe you'll look full as good that day as Amabel, if she is the beauty of Chagford." Letty Hetty arose as she spoke and left the room with a last look at her Nancy, full of loving pride in her.

It seemed to Nancy during these March days that her quiet world had suddenly begun to seethe. There was no manner of doubt that the world was really spinning along through space, a fact that everybody admits, but which no one realizes.

From being the quietest of home girls, busy with household tasks, her lessons, her family life, with loving Rick, her mother, her comrade father in his darkness, she found herself submerged in preparations for a formal church wedding, in which she was one of three bridesmaids, and in rehearsals with

her father of her two scenes with Rick in the hospital entertainment.

"Doctor-daddy," she cried one day, bursting in upon her father in the library. "Do you suppose I'm ever going to keep my head when the time comes? I was trying myself in my lines just now, while I was dusting my room, and what do you suppose I said? 'You see me, Lord Bassanio, as I stand, but for myself alone the quality of mercy is not strained —' There I stopped, and to save my life I couldn't think what was wrong! Just ran my two scenes right together! It will be a perfect mercy if I don't recite 'Hey, diddle, diddle' that night! Wouldn't it be funny, in Portia's mortar-board cap and gown? But I never knew such a flustering time!"

"Don't test your memory so often," advised the doctor. "Come here and sit on the arm of my chair and cool off, Mrs. Siddons-Modjeska! You will mix yourself up badly if you worry over your lines. There isn't the least need of it. Do you forget that we used to recite 'The Merchant of Venice' to each other when you were quite a small girl and we were driving along the country roads with our Tonic?"

"Indeed, I shall never live to be old enough to

forget, daddy mine, if I live to see Chagford melt away and Mimi, Amabel and Doris' great-great-grandchildren running air ships over the places where Tonic used to trot!" Nancy laid her cheek down on her father's head as she spoke and he put one hand up to pull the hair that tickled his ear.

"Such a picture of extreme futurity!" he exclaimed. "But those were days worth remembering, ladybird."

"*Are* days, not *were* days, fatherums!" Nancy corrected him. "They never have ceased one minute. I must go; I have forty 'leven things to do, as Letty Hetty says. I shall be glad when Easter comes and I can settle down to a private character again. Now I'm nothing but a pink bridesmaid and a red — blushing red — Shakespearean actress."

The twenty-fifth of March, Louise's wedding day, fell on Wednesday. Monday brought Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence and Althea to Doctor Porter's, with Miles arriving on Tuesday.

"I'm going up to Mrs. Willis' early, if you'll excuse me, Aunt Mildred," he said. "I can't see her to-morrow, Louise I mean," he added mournfully.

"Why?" asked Rick.

"Wedding day. I can't call there," said Miles, with entire gravity.

"Well, considering that the wedding is at noon, and the breakfast at one!" cried Rick, with a laugh.

"Nevertheless, I can't call there to-morrow night," persisted Miles.

"Oh, do go this instant, Miles!" cried his mother, laughing. "I can't imagine how my son ever grew into such a simpleton."

"That's clever foolishness, Mary; he gets it from me," said Mr. Lawrence, as seriously as Miles always spoke when he was talking nonsense.

Althea Lawrence had brought the bridesmaids' hats with her, and she and Nancy put theirs on. Stephen had been dispatched with Amabel's at once. Nancy said that she did not dare let Amabel's stay in the house an hour, for she knew that Amabel would be pining to see it, and "she was afraid of Amabel. She's so grown up, Althea! Now you aren't, not a bit, and yet you are older than Louise!" she added.

"Nancy, be careful that you never say that outside this house!" Althea warned her. "That's why I am maid of honour, though, so there are compensations. You and Amabel are merely bridesmaids."

"ALTHEA LAWRENCE HAD BROUGHT THE BRIDESMAIDS' HATS WITH HER."

"I don't think there's any *merely* about being a bridesmaid, Althea," said Nancy. "Mercy, what dreams of hats!"

Althea had opened the hat trunk which she had sent up to Chagford, and on her knees was holding up for admiration two hats so pink and beautiful, with their soft drooping brims, their long, soft single pink feather, that even Mr. Lawrence was moved to admire, and Rick said "they looked like something to play on the violin!" than which he knew no higher praise.

"Put them on, maid and maid of honour," suggested Mrs. Lawrence.

"You can't tell anything about mine with my hair flattened like this," said Althea, making the inevitable remark that precedes any girl's putting on any hat, at any time. But she set the hat on her golden hair, nevertheless, and crowned Nancy's dark hair with the other, and waited for the applause that instantly followed.

"Are you forgetting the rehearsal, Nancy?" Mrs. Porter reminded them.

"Oh, Althea, we are!" cried Nancy. "Poor Miles! He won't be allowed to pay a call in peace, even to-night. We ought to be at the church in ten minutes. Do you suppose Miles'

friend will forget? The best man must be there, too."

"Richie is going down to the inn to bring his cousin here to meet Aunt Mary and Uncle Lawrence — and Althea, when you return — and he will see that Miles' supporter remembers his appointment. Mark, dear, here is your coat. You have to rehearse giving Louise away," said Mrs. Porter, holding her husband's great coat ready for his arms.

"I wonder why even the best of women enjoy a wedding, while even the worst of men can't endure the fussiness of one!" the doctor pretended to grumble, submitting to the coat.

Wednesday was a beautiful day. Nancy was out of bed eight times in the night to peep out and make sure that the stars were still as bright as they had been at bed-time. The natural result of this choppy sort of sleeping was that she overslept in the morning. Still, as Letty Hetty reminded her mother "she needed it!" Althea and she dressed early, and came down to present themselves for their families' approval. Then Nancy felt her father's blindness with a fresh pang. He stood, smiling with forced cheerfulness, on the hearth, just a little "out of it," as Rick whispered to Nancy. The boy and the girl

both knew how much he wished that he could see his little girl in her charming costume.

"I want to show you Nancy, sir," said Rick, with an inspiration, taking Nancy's hand and leading her up to her father. "Her hair, you see, is twisted behind her ears, so that it is soft and full; then it sort of goes back and begins to be braided, and is pinned back and forth across her head at the rear — I'm not up in terms, but that's O. K. Her hat's beyond me. It kind of droops softly, makes a shadow over her forehead, yet it isn't over her face. It's all twists and puffs and bows of something thin and mighty pretty, and it's got one dandy feather that comes around and touches her hair — it's all right, and that's official! Her dress and her hat are just the colour of a wild rose, not a wild rose that's growing in a place so wet it's turned dark and strong coloured, nor one out on the side of the road, where it's so hot it's faded, but a wild rose that's exactly its own colour, the pink that's — wild rose colour! Now you know, I'm sure. And her dress — well, I give that up. It's thin as cobwebs, made over silk, I guess, because there's a shine under it. The skirt is full, straight, no nonsense about it. The waist — well, that's what gets me. There's a kind of a collar that repented of being

a collar, and turned into floating ends and went wandering off down over the skirt. And the sleeves are all tucked and puffy, and kind of strapped down: I guess they were afraid they'd follow the collar! And once in a while white lace comes out from them, and down the waist under that collar's floating ends till the whole thing looks like a flower, or a dawn. And Nancy — Well, you know how she looks. Her eyes are black, they're so excited, and her cheeks are a little pink, and she's laughing at me this minute, yet she'd half like to cry, because she's a girl and every girl likes to cry when there's a wedding, and that's becoming to her. She looks — she looks like our Nancy and that's the most I can say!" Rick broke off with a long look at Nancy and a sudden embarrassment. He had been trying to give the doctor a vision of Nancy, in earnest, though he did it playfully, and now, somehow, he seemed to see Nancy himself as he had never seen her before. He quite stared at her, surprised to find that this was the case.

"Thank you, mirror," said the doctor quietly. "You are a faithful mirror; I see clearly what you reflect. It's a sweet picture, because we love our Nancy-girl."

"Yes, sir," said Rick. And Nancy cried: "You'd

never think I didn't look nice, Doctor-daddy, and so it never will matter much how I look. Yet I like to have other people think I look nice — for your sake."

Nancy turned away with a shy glance at Rick. This detailed description of herself had made her feel ill at ease with Rick for the moment.

Soon it was time to start for the church. Fred, Bumblebee and the kittens were safely bestowed and the house was locked, for Letty Hetty was going to the church, too, to see Louise Willis married to Miles; she had always known them both and they both loved her.

Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence were taken up to the front pew, Mrs. Porter with Rick followed immediately behind them. The wedding party waited in the baptistery, which was off the church vestibule on the left. It was not long before the organ prelude sounded, and then the choir sang the wedding hymn.

The procession formed. First the ushers, friends of Miles' at Harvard, a cousin of Louise's, and her brother. Then the bridesmaids, Amabel, in her really wonderful beauty, that was brilliant, if not lovely, and Nancy, not precisely pretty, but wholly lovely, fine and flower-like and graceful, with a look

of exaltation on her face, for she was stirred by this giving of Louise, whom she so dearly loved.

And then Althea Lawrence, stately and dignified, young as she was she was already the elegant woman that her mother had been before her.

And last of all Louise, the bride, pretty as she always was, but especially so under her shimmering veil. Her face was pale, not rosy, as usual; it was sweet and womanly, with a tremulous, smiling gravity. She leaned on the arm of Doctor Porter, who was to serve as her father would have done in giving her away. His fine face looked older, paler than it had, but peaceful and contented. His hair was white now, and his massive, shaggy head, splendid in its intellectual proportions, was bent fatherly toward Louise. There was no one there that did not feel the pathos of the great man's blindness.

Miles and his groomsman met the procession at the altar, and the ceremony was begun. Only a few moments and it was ended. Doctor Porter relinquished his place, and Miles took his wife down the aisle, at the head of the returning procession, to the jubilant strains of the Mendelssohn "Wedding March." They were followed by the attendants, and, at a suitable interval, by all the friends

who had filled the church to see this pretty wedding.

There was a wedding breakfast at Mrs. Willis' house, tasteful, delightful, served to the accompaniment of a string quartette in a room blooming with Killarney roses, for this had been a pink wedding, as befitted the coming of spring.

Louise cut her cake, divided her bouquet, gave each of her bridesmaids a wild rose brooch, precisely the colour of their gowns, set with a diamond dewdrop in its heart. There were the usual greetings and wishes, the telegrams from relatives who were at a distance too great for them to be present, the rapid talk and laughter, the tears that Louise's mother, Louise and those who loved her best fought hard not to shed. Then the disappearance of the bride and groom for a short time, their reappearance in travelling garb, the shower of confetti, the flight through it, dodging the old slipper that was thrown, the slipping through the automobile that was supposed to take them away, and was accordingly decked with every conceivable wedding favour, out of it into the demure carriage beyond. Then Mr. and Mrs. Miles Lawrence were gone!

That night at home Nancy stole away from her new room in which were gathered "the survivors,"

as Mr. Lawrence said, into the library where her father had repaired for a solitary pipe, if the truth were told in the hope that Nancy would miss and follow him.

"A happy day, daughter?" the doctor asked, as Nancy perched herself upon the arm of his chair and rested her head on his, in her favourite position.

"Oh, yes, but rather solemn, and I'm tired," said Nancy. "Father, I'm glad I'm only a little past sixteen and rather little girlish at that!"

"So am I, Nancy," said the doctor quickly. "Why are you?"

"Oh, I suppose seeing you give Louise away made me realize how horrid it might be to be grown up. I wouldn't let you give me away! I'll never, never leave you!"

"Dear heart, I begin to think that you never will," said the doctor, but Nancy did not read the thought that lay behind his words. "Heaven knows, I don't know how I could ever give you away, my Nancy!"

"It's just like that song called 'Daddy,' isn't it, M. D. — my daddy and my dearest?" whispered Nancy, her lips close to his ear. She hummed the pathetic, sweet air:

"'For I've got you and you've got me,
And everything seems right.'

"I don't want to be anything but the doctor's daughter all my life, even if I get too big to be the doctor's little girl any longer."

CHAPTER XVII

THE PORTERS — M. D. AND LL. D.

"IT seems to me that life in Chagford is becoming rather more than strenuous," Doctor Porter growled, with the smile that proved he liked it.

"There's no use grumbling, sir, when you look like that and so 'ungrumble the grumble,'" said Nancy. "But we certainly are living like corn in a popper these days!"

It was true. No sooner was the wedding over than rehearsals for the entertainment "became chronic," as the doctor said, brought to a white heat of haste by the fact that the day was but two weeks distant.

"My dear Dame Trot, it's all very fine to work, but you know there's no more hope of getting Horace Willis to play Shylock passably well than there was of getting Shylock to forego his revenge — and you, as Portia, ought to know how impos-

sible you find it to persuade poor Shylock," said the doctor. "And Frank McCutcheon as Antonio doesn't yet reveal any symptoms of becoming an Edwin Booth."

"They are pretty awful," admitted Nancy. "Rick is fine! I'm proud of Rick. I'm not proud of Nancy, but she may get through if she says every word exactly as you tell her to. Father! I never thought of it! Play Shylock yourself! Horace would be thankful to be let off."

"Mark, that's an excellent suggestion," said Mrs. Porter, looking up from her household accounts at her desk. "I've heard the rehearsals and I truly think that what might be a pretty and creditable performance is going to be dreadful with Horace. Take the Shylock; it doesn't mean any effort. You'll be stage manager in any case, and you know Shylock's lines."

"He knows everybody's lines!" cried Nancy triumphantly. "And he's going to take Shylock; I see him doing it this moment."

"Well," admitted the doctor, "if Horace wants me to, since there's no one else."

Horace Willis jumped at the chance to be relieved of his onerous part when Nancy tactfully conveyed to him that it might be done. So the doc-

tor found himself one of the actors in what was described in the announcement as "Dramatic Recitations from 'The Merchant of Venice,' in costume," but which were as fitly described as an amateur acting of two scenes of that play. The doctor enjoyed his promotion. It made him happy and younger to take a share of the fun with the girls and boys, and on the other hand he so loved his Shakespeare that he found delight in impersonating the abused and relentless Shylock, who had been deprived of everything but revenge — and lost that also! Doctor Porter was thoroughly sorry for Shylock. The great day dawned in Easter week, on Thursday, an April day as to sunshine but not with April's showers.

That afternoon there was a ceremonial opening of the hospital. It was formally given over to Chagford and accepted by the town officials with speeches and the delivery of the deed. Physicians from all parts of the state were present and inspected the wards, the private rooms, the kitchens, the glass-inclosed sunbaths, all with compliments to the architects and to the Chagford people who had built this fine hospital for the public weal.

Mrs. Porter and Nancy sat among the audience when the speeches were made, glad and proud that

their beloved doctor was the physician-in-chief of the new hospital, and was receiving on all sides the honour due him for its perfections. Nancy's place as attendant upon her father had been delegated to Rick. The doctor could not move about the building without some one at his elbow to guide him from mishap, and save him from possible awkwardness from his blindness. It was more suitable that Rick should fill that rôle than Nancy, especially now that Rick was some day to practise in this hospital.

But what was this that Doctor Davidson was saying about the hospital's name? Mrs. Porter caught Nancy's hand in a tight squeeze, and Nancy pressed her mother's hand, both breathless with pleasure and with fear of losing a syllable.

"There has been discussion of the name of our new hospital," Doctor Davidson said. "Some people wanted it called the Lakeside Hospital, because of its position here, facing our pretty lake. Others wanted it called merely the Chagford Hospital. But the majority were in favour of another name and when it was proposed the vote for this name was unanimous. It is customary, when the name of a saint is applied to a hospital, to choose St. Luke's, because that evangelist was 'the beloved physician.' But we Chagford people think

that we should like to have our hospital bear the name of its first presiding physician, the one to whom, more than to any other one person, it owes its existence. As he would not be willing that the hospital should be named directly for him we have decided to give it the name of the other evangelist, since this is our head physician's name. The hospital, therefore, will be called St. Mark's Hospital. Doctor Porter cannot protest if we name it for St. Mark the Evangelist, though that be the name of the doctor's patron saint."

Doctor Davidson turned to Doctor Porter with a smile and a bow as he ended, and the whole room seemed to Nancy to be one great cheer, so loud, hearty, unanimous was the shout that hailed this announcement.

"Oh, my dear Mark!" murmured Mrs. Porter. "I am so thankful that they all know him for what he is!"

"Davidson does it up handsomely, when he once renounces his personal ambition; he wanted badly to be the physician-in-chief here," Nancy heard one man say to another, sitting near her.

Nancy clapped her hands before she remembered that the doctor's daughter ought not to applaud his public recognition, and then she clapped them again

because she was so glad that he was thus recognized and because she felt that it was barely just. By that time her mother had got one of her hands fast again and she did not have to do violence to her feelings by refraining from applauding, for she could no longer clap.

Doctor Porter was on his feet, bowing to the applause. When the room was quiet he said, with an eloquent tremor in his voice: "Thank you, dear old friends. It is most good of you to give the hospital my name indirectly. I must not ignore Doctor Davidson's hint that it was done for my sake. But it proves nothing but your kindness, which I've long known well. I hope St. Mark the Evangelist's name may supplement the many deficiencies of Doctor Mark Porter in the hospital management. With all my heart I thank you."

Somehow the beloved familiar figure that had been part of Chagford's joys and sorrows for more than a generation, standing there, big, rugged, grand — and blind — went to the heart of every one that looked on it. The tears ran down Mrs. Porter's cheeks like rain as she smiled thankfully, and Nancy sobbed openly, applauding for dear life, unchecked, because she must applaud. All around them tears stood in loving eyes and all the Chag-

fords, — Chagford proper, Chagford Falls and North Chagford, — rose as one man and cheered their dear old friend long and heartily.

Letty Hetty had hurried home ahead of the Porters, quite as much moved and delighted by what she had heard and seen as any of them, but with the practical care of their welfare on her shoulders. She had an early supper ready for them on their return, of which they partook hastily and made ready for the evening's supplement to the serious happiness of the afternoon.

The entertainment was to be given in the Opera House — of course Chagford had an Opera House, although the nearest to an opera that was ever given in it was when a theatrical company included the three Chagfords in its engagements.

There was not a seat vacant in the house and people were early placed against the walls at the rear, cheerfully willing to stand throughout the evening to enjoy the talent gathered for their benefit. They enjoyed it the more that the audience knew the performers so well that it gave them almost the sense of doing the singing, acting, playing, dancing themselves to see it done.

It was really a creditable performance. Chagford had reason to be proud of its sons and daughters.

The music was good, several people in the Chagfords sang well. The Coggs girls danced a "Hungarian folk dance" that was delightful — and may have been Hungarian, Chagford was not in a position to dispute it.

But the feature of this first half of the programme was the Italian folk songs sung by Rick's cousin, who made the prettiest Italian peasant imaginable in her bright coloured skirt and black velvet bodice, with the gold beads around her slender neck, the big gold hoop earrings in her ears, the white linen cloth folded squarely over her black hair. Rick beside her in Neapolitan costume, which set off his remarkable beauty not less for his un-Neapolitan fairness, played her accompaniments with his violin resting on his wine-coloured velvet jacket, played as if sparks of the fire of Vesuvius had mingled with the moonlight on the Bay of Naples and had kindled, yet saddened his spirit.

Still there was no doubt that the interest of the audience centred on the dramatic half of the programme, which came last, after an interlude of fifteen minutes in which everybody told everybody else how well the relatives of each had acquitted themselves.

The fifteen minutes proved twenty-five minutes

before the curtain rose on a room in Portia's house. A few carved chairs constituted the furniture. Their important adjunct being a long table on which were set the three caskets of gold, silver and lead, two of which held good advice which those who opened them would be in no mood to heed, for the third casket held Portia's portrait, and he who opened that would find her face smiling at him and win her for his wife.

Enter then Portia — Nancy — and Nerissa, her maid, spiritedly played by Cord, who entered into the scene as if she had always known Shakespeare, being a little creature that divined everything by her quick instinct.

Nancy wore a gown of white satin trimmed with gold, with a great lace ruff rising from her shoulders, framing her face, and chains of jewels that fell over her slender neck almost to her feet, gleaming, hardly less beautiful in colour that they were decidedly not precious gems.

There was a flourish of trumpets and the Prince of Morocco entered with his train, while Portia and Nerissa stood back against a heavy crimson curtain that made an effective background for their girlish charms. The Prince was black, turbaned, gorgeous, though painfully conscious of the admiration

of the small boys in the audience for his complexion. He strode to the caskets and gazed at them, wondering which would give him Portia, who stood, evidently hoping that he would not choose aright. "'The first of gold, who this inscription bears,'" murmured the Prince. But everybody knows the scene in the second act of "The Merchant of Venice," and how the Prince of Morocco, misled by the inscription of the golden casket, chose that one, and won for his pains a skull and the writing: "All that glitters is not gold." The Prince sadly departed, taking leave of Portia, who broke into a laugh as he went, and clapped her hands girlishly.

"A gentle riddance," she said to Nerissa joyfully.

Next of Portia's suitors to try his fate was the Prince of Arragon, and he chose the silver casket. It held but the mocking of a fool's head, instead of Portia's loveliness, and the jeering lines which told him that he had won his just deserts.

So the Prince of Arragon, like his predecessor of Morocco, departed, bidding Portia farewell, and Portia, with Nerissa, followed him, saying: "Thus hath the candle singed the moth."

Next entered Lord Bassanio of Venice, Rick, so splendid to look upon in his festal garments of vel-

vets and satin, shining with jewels, that it was natural that Portia, entering with him, should beg him to delay his choice of the casket a little while, lest he should choose the wrong one and be forced to go away. For plainly the young Bassanio had been at Portia's house of Belmont long enough to make her anxious that he should choose the right casket and stay with her as her lord for ever.

But Bassanio could not wait to learn his fate, and, hesitating over the caskets, he discussed which one to take, while behind the stage was sung the music that Portia ordered, that exquisite song of Shakespeare's:

> "Tell me where is fancy bred,
> Or in the heart or in the head?"

Bassanio chose the right casket, the leaden one! He opened it, and there within it lay Portia's portrait, which he snatched up and hailed with ecstasy for its beauty and for its message to him that he was the lucky suitor that had won her. Then Portia stepped forward, standing straight and bending her head in proud humility she recited the lines which are the most beautiful expression of devotion that has been penned. "You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand, such as I am: though for myself

"RICK LED NANCY BEFORE THE CURTAIN THRICE."

alone I would not be ambitious in my wish to wish myself much better; yet for you I would be trebled twenty times myself." Thus Portia goes on to say how much she longs to be, yet only to be so much for one she loves.

The audience was breathlessly still as Nancy repeated these lines in her low, soft voice, thrillingly, movingly. Her father had trained her well, but her own poetic imagination had completed his work. It was something to remember to hear Nancy, as Portia, utter her generous gift of a great heart.

Nor did Rick fall short in his repeating of the lines in which Bassanio accepts Portia's humble generosity that yet was proud in humbling itself. When the curtain fell the applause was tremendous and entirely sincere. Rick led Nancy before the curtain thrice to bow their thanks, twice with Cord at his other hand. Perhaps the insistence of the applause was partly because everybody wanted to see again the pretty picture that these young things made in their mediæval finery.

The court scene was to follow at once. Rick rapidly changed to a wine-coloured velvet doublet and breeches, slashed with pale blue. Nancy put on her black silk gown and mortar-board cap, which as the lawyer that was to defend Bassanio's friend,

Antonio, Portia wears in this act. She looked so childish in the sober garments, and so pretty, that it strained one's credulity to believe that no one in the court room penetrated the disguise, and knew Portia for herself.

"Goodness, Nancy, all Venice will be on to you!" cried Rick, when he saw her, struck by this fact. "You look about ten, and nobody on earth would mistake you for a judge!"

"'A second Daniel come to judgment,' that's what I am!" quoted Nancy. "Oh, there's our dear old Shylock!"

The doctor was coming toward them. He wore a long gray wig, a black skull cap, the gabardine of the Jew, which garment was their badge of race in the Middle Ages. His face was lined and seamed by his make-up; he looked the wretched, storm-beaten man, consumed with pain and with hatred for those who had tortured him, intent on revenge.

"Oh, Daddy-doctor, what a splendid make-up!" cried Nancy. "My, but you look the part!" added Rick.

"Are you ready, younglings?" asked the doctor.

"All ready. We are both doctors now; you are an M. D. and I'm an LL. D.!" laughed Nancy.

And the doctor, handling her legal silken gown and mortar-board, said: "So it seems! Come then, and administer justice, Portia Porter."

Then, on the instant, rang through the hall that cry, most horrible of all sounds in a crowd: "Fire! Fire!" And in a twinkling there arose the screams and rushing of hundreds of people, panic-stricken in a moment.

"Who cried fire?" exclaimed the doctor, realizing the danger.

Then happened what seemed like a kind of miracle. The doctor forgot that he was blind, forgot himself altogether, remembering only the tragedy that in a moment would be past preventing. Because he thus forgot, he burst through the door that led from the side of the stage into a narrow passage to the hall, and ran without hesitation or stumbling, guided by instinct and the sense of the main pressure of the crowd, straight into the heart of it.

The orchestra was bravely playing, Doctor Davidson and a few others were trying to quell the sudden tumult, but in vain. Smoke, rising beside the gallery stairs, cried to the insensate throng to save themselves, and it called louder than human voices could call to check the mad onrush to destruction,

destruction more certain and awful than the flames threatened.

Doctor Porter ran down the aisle, borne unerringly on the wings of his own excitement, going as straight to his point, and without a stumble, as if he had not been blind. The sight of him thus coming in his Shylock garb had its effect; even in that moment the people realized that it was wonderful.

"Stop!" cried the doctor. "Stop! Fall back! Take your seats. We'll save you. There's no danger. It's all right."

The people heard him and, somehow, they obeyed him. There was that in his voice to which the crowd swayed — almost everybody there had long been in the habit of listening to that voice for its verdict of life or death.

The people fell back, not much, but enough to give the advantage to those who would control them. Doctor Davidson and the other men were quick to seize this advantage and to hold it.

"Rick, bring your violin! Come here! Come, Nancy!" shouted the doctor.

Nancy and Rick obeyed, coming down the aisle through the crowd. Rick's beauty showed in its highest perfection; he was as white as marble, but he valiantly held his violin on his shoulder, an assur-

ance to everybody that there was nothing to fear. Nancy came close behind him in her judge's gown and cap; with difficulty, but steadily, they made their way to Doctor Porter.

"Here we are, father," said Nancy. "What am I to do, sir?" asked Rick at the same instant.

The doctor stood with his back against the door, restraining the crowd.

"Play your best, Rick. Nancy, march with Rick around the hall. Clear the way! Follow my girl and boy. Would I send Nancy into danger?" cried the doctor.

Those nearest heard him, and repeated the order and the brief argument.

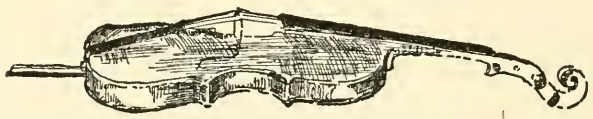
Rick and Nancy led, Rick playing gloriously. The crowd fell into line behind them. Around the hall they went, gathering everybody into the lengthening line, Doctor Porter and the other men marshalling, encouraging, controlling them, past the increasing smoke of the danger spot. At the door Nancy and Rick halted, Rick still playing, while, three abreast, the entire audience filed past them in order, out into safety. When the last one had gone Doctor Porter turned to the little group which waited him in pallid silence, his wife, Rick's cousin, Nancy and Rick, and Letty Hetty.

"Thank the Lord!" the doctor said fervently. "There was no danger from the flames, but the panic — " He stopped, shuddering.

The fire department had come and was beginning to fight the fire. The doctor and his family left the hall and walked in silence down the street, having delayed long enough to see that the fire would easily be controlled.

The doctor looked white and excited. He paused a moment under the illumination of the group of electric lights before the drug store.

"I didn't act Shylock, nor you his judge, my bonny," he said, tucking Nancy's hand under his arm. "But we have saved more than one Antonio from death. It is a great comfort to a blind man to know that he still can be helpful among active men. I think you and Rick and I must go home and give each other the Victoria Cross for courage on the field of battle." He looked thankfully glad. At last he knew that he was still a man among men and a leader of men.



CHAPTER XVIII

THE QUARTETTE

"IT'S Taizie Coggs, mother," said Nancy, turning from the telephone, her hand over the mouth of the tube. "She says that they want to come down here to spend the day, that they'll die if they don't but not to let them come if it isn't perfectly convenient. I told her to come — you heard me — but she insists on my asking you."

"How could I sentence the twins to death?" laughed Mrs. Porter. "Does she mean both pairs are coming? But it is perfectly convenient; I'd really enjoy them to-day. Tell Taizie that."

Nancy turned back to the instrument. "Taizie, are you still there? Oh! Mother says she doesn't see how she could sentence you to death, but it happens that it's not only convenient to have you to-day, but that she'd enjoy your visit. . . . All right. . . . Why, whenever you're ready. Spending the day ought to mean spending all of it, not half of it, and

the forenoon is the best part of any day. It isn't like an invitation to lunch; you can come when you please here. . . . Now you know I didn't mean that you invited yourselves! I may not be able to box your ears by telephone, but I can do it when you get here, if you're saucy now. Both pairs are coming, aren't they? . . . Not Miss Drummond? Oh, that's too bad. . . . Tell her I hope it will stop aching soon. . . . Excitement last night? . . . Give her aromatic, and make her lie down. . . . Of course; I'm the doctor's assistant, why shouldn't I know what to prescribe? . . . No, we're not one bit the worse for it. Good-bye. Hurry up and come down! Doesn't that sound like a seesaw? Good-bye."

Nancy rang off and turned back to her mother. "You heard my side of the conversation, so you know that Rhoda Drummond isn't coming; she has an awful headache from the excitement of the fire last night. Both pairs of twins are coming. Oughtn't I run out to tell Letty Hetty? Mr. Black's boy hasn't come yet for the order; neither has Mr. Evans' boy. We ought to get eight more chops and some sort of fresh vegetable, oughtn't we? Maizie Coggs would walk barefooted over red kales to get cauliflower; suppose we have that?"

"Very well," assented Mrs. Porter absent-mindedly. "But you meant red coals, Nancy."

"No, ma'am, I didn't, please!" said Nancy promptly. "Oh, dear; I wish I had stayed in Venice last night and remained Portia! There's no use in being clever yourself in your own country. That was a witticism, Mrs. Porter. Isn't kale a cabbage? And isn't cauliflower a cousin of the cabbage? Now don't you see how subtle and brilliant my allusion was?"

"Nancy, I see! I'm profoundly apologetic! My stupidity is only to be explained by the fact that we were talking of cabbage heads and they may be contagious," sighed Mrs. Porter, with exaggerated humility.

"Wish, wash! I-wish-it-washed-out!" said Nancy, falling back on her own childish invention of a formula for obliterating offences. "Now your stupidity is forgiven and forgotten. I wouldn't have been so impertinent as to call it that first hand, but you said it. I should have merely said, mildly, that you were an unappreciative parent, that you did not deserve to have such a clever, remarkable daughter, and that as soon as I was of age I should go where I was properly looked up to, and loved, and well treated." At each of these accusations of ill treat-

ment Nancy punctuated her would-have-been "mild" remarks with a little shake of her mother's shoulders, which she held with both hands, and ended with a kiss that resounded like a small explosion. Then she danced away to talk over the lunch with Letty Hetty. Since her father had been blind Nancy had fallen into the way of treating her mother as a sort of plaything, undoubtedly because she never lost a sense of her mother's grief over her husband's affliction.

The Coggs girls came spinning down in their big car, beaming at the windows of the Porter house before they caught sight of any one to welcome them. But that happened in a moment. Mrs. Porter and Nancy, both, ran out on the piazza, the doctor pulled aside the library curtains and waved his hand out of the window, Letty Hetty, sweeping off the flagstones of the walk at the side of the house, saluted them with her broom, Bumblebee waved her tail like a flag — although she waved it because Flip and Funny were trying to catch it, it had the effect of a salute — while Fred really did salute the arrivals with glad waggings of his own plume tail.

"Well, if you hadn't said we could come I don't know what would have happened!" cried Maizie, out-stripping her sisters in their rush up to the

house. "We're so full of that fire, and what the doctor did, that we'd have exploded if we couldn't have come here."

"I said we'd have to come if you wouldn't give us any lunch and we had to make it a box picnic," added Daisy.

"We all said things like that, but what's the use of repeating all the Coggs' smartness? We're here now, anyhow," chimed in Hazie.

"Did you say you were full of fire, Maizie?" asked the doctor, coming out of the library. "Perhaps I ought to prescribe a chemical compound for you, the sort of thing they use in those fire-extinguisher tubes? You are sure it isn't ordinary heartburn?"

"I'm dead sure my heart does burn!" cried Maizie, throwing her arms around the dear man's neck and kissing him as vehemently as Nancy ever did. "When I think of the way you saved everybody's life last night, and what a horrible, horrible time there'd have been in that hall in just one minute if it hadn't been for you — well!"

"Yes, and if anybody'd have got clear, stark, raving crazy with excitement it would have been these Coggs twins!" said Daisy.

"Yes, sir; we'd have been torn to shreds, and so

would everybody near us, for we'd have fought like hyenas to get out while we was being torn," added Taizie, relapsing into her earlier use of English, as the girls still did occasionally when they were excited.

"Sure!" said Hazie. "We're red-headed, you know, and you never find cool brains under red hair, they say. We'd have been found in the ruins afterward looking like that shredded cocoanut you buy ready-made for cake filling. So would Cordie Tilden; she's another of the sort that get nutty right off the bat when things befall 'em."

"You aren't red-haired; your hair is splendid, it's only tawny," said Nancy.

"It isn't toney!" retorted Maizie, with her jolly laugh. "You needn't try to comfort us, ducky; we don't care a hair out of a dog's tail what colour our hair is. I'd about as lieves not have any at all, I get so sick and tired of combing snarls out of this 'tawny' mop. But it would be kind of conspicuous to go around with your head white and bare like those bust things in the Boston Art Museum you showed us, and goodness knows what we'd stick our hat-pins into — I suppose we'd have to wear side loops of something and catch 'em around our ears!"

"Maizie, you certainly are wound up this morn-

ing! You all are," cried Mrs. Porter, laughing in the highest enjoyment of the breezy quartette. "Is this the effect of the fire?"

"Guess 'tis; we sat up the best part of the night talking and talking about it and we can't seem to calm down," said Maizie. "It's a good thing nobody's keeping tap on our breaks, or we'd be broke! You know we pay a fine, into a vase we've got, every time we slip up in English — or down into slang. It used to get full at least once a week till Taizie proposed our keeping strict account and paying up in a bill when it reached a dollar. But now that vase gets a rest once in a while. It would have overflowed, or its bottom would have dropped out since the fire, though, if we'd been paying attention to our speech. We seemed to settle it, sort of, that in case of fire nothing counted."

"It is pleasant out here on the piazza this warm morning, but I wonder why nobody suggests going into the house?" remarked Doctor Porter. "When I was young *my* mother always said: 'Won't you come in?' pleasantly and kindly, when company arrived, but the ladies of my household show no signs of hospitality. I wonder why?"

"Because they've lived for years and years with a great, gruff bear whom Grandma Porter never

taught these kindly ways you speak of!" returned Nancy, giving her father's arm a shake. "Will you walk in, Miss Coggs, Miss Margaret Coggs, Miss Teresa Coggs, Miss Hazel Coggs? Won't you come in and lay off your things and stop a while?" Nancy spoke with such an exact imitation of Miss Augusta Clark's forbidding manner of welcoming her guests that everybody laughed, recognizing it instantly.

The girls repaired to Nancy's room to take off coats and hats and fluff up the bright reddish hair, that was not red, but yellow with a strong reddish cast; Nancy correctly described it as tawny. The Coggs girls had learned to dress in the course of their three years' possession of wealth; they wore pretty tailored cloth skirts and coats and silk waists to match, just as other girls of their age did. But they always managed to produce a tropical effect that no one else had. For one thing nothing could ever prevent them from wearing more rings than they should, not from love of display, but from their delight in the colour and life of the gems, which they could see when they were on their own hands. Then by a bow here, a florid, sparkling ornament in the hair, a striking belt, jewelled buckles on their shoes, by all these and other slight variations from the canons of good taste these generous young creatures

unconsciously betrayed their difference from their mates. Yet their differences were all on the side of warmth and kindliness. Their love of colour, glitter, liberty was but a part of their bigness of heart, for the Coggs girls had been compounded with a certain splendour of nature that made them sail through life bestowing and receiving happiness, and prevented them from ever being tempted to petty meanness.

Taizie turned from the glass and beamed on Nancy. "Is your mother going to be busy? We want to talk fifteen to a dozen this morning; we've some things to tell and get advised about."

"To tell the honest truth we've already made up our minds," said Daisy. "But we want your mother to approve of us."

"I've often noticed that's what most people want when they ask advice, but they won't say so, or else they don't know it themselves," laughed Nancy. "Come down to my room. Father is going — has gone, probably — up to the hospital to attend the meeting to audit accounts of the expenses of the opening, and to arrange for his lecture hours. He's going to lecture to the younger physicians. He has a class arranged — twenty-eight men, a few that mean to study medicine — Rick is going to attend — and the others are young doctors from neighbour-

ing towns. Isn't that the best thing for father? It will do him lots of good!"

"It's the best thing for the men," said Maizie decidedly. "It will do them lots of good."

"That's what Doctor Davidson said when he spoke of it to me," said Nancy, leading the way to her new room.

They found Nancy's mother already established there with a great basket of mending. "I don't know how my mending has gotten so far ahead of me," she said apologetically. "We have been so busy this winter. I thought we should probably sit down for 'a dish of talk' this morning, and that this would be my chance to catch up with this work."

"It will be your chance to catch help!" declared Hazie Coggs. "We'll all mend; we girls are great darners! Take hold here, twinsies! Nancy, you come in on this contract, too!"

They all dove into Mrs. Porter's basket and came up with a garment apiece, some of which needed a patch and some careful darning. Daisy held up a napkin that had been torn on the line in a frost and emphasized her remarks with it.

"We've got two knock-down surprises to tell you, Mrs. Porter," she said.

"Yes, but first of all we want to ask you about the books," said Taizie. "You know we haven't bought our library, and of course we know that living in a showy house, keeping a big car and an Elijah-chauffeur, and wearing good clothes and diamonds, and not having a library is the limit. But you know you told us not to bother with books for a while."

"I think I told you not to buy books as you would groceries, order them in for the sake of having them in the house in case it stormed," laughed Mrs. Porter. "The books one buys should be to read, and I thought you'd do well to learn to love them first."

"Well, we hadn't read anything but newspapers when we got our money," said Taizie.

"Then we got so we liked it when Rhoda read to us; we had a great time over Dickens, cried and laughed and got ripping. And she started us in easy on nice girls' books, the 'Little Colonel' series and others. Then we began to read for ourselves — we bought those books, you know, just as fast as we liked 'em. And we've caught on quite a lot; we like heaps of things we couldn't have stood three years ago — of course we're getting older, as well as toned down, and wound up! Now we wondered if you'd

say we ought to go ahead and order the books everybody's supposed to own — and like, but I'll bet they don't! Or would you just keep on letting books creep up on us and crawl into the house by degrees? Daisy's gone on fairy stories, but I love detective stories, and we all are fond of — love stories!" Taizie confessed this as if she were mortified by a weakness that is common, for all the world loves romance.

"I think I would not order books wholesale even yet, Taizie. I think I still would keep to my rule of letting my library grow, make it stand for my own tastes," said Mrs. Porter.

"We thought you'd say so!" cried Maizie. "Rhoda rather advises us to get the books into the house, and see if we can't kind of absorb 'em, so to speak. But down in the bottom of our twin hearts we suspect we won't ever be great on books. We're not cut on a literary pattern."

"You don't have to be bookish," said Nancy decidedly. "Everybody can't be bookworms, and some of the cleverest people aren't that sort one bit."

"It's nice of you to say that," said Hazie, with a grateful look, "for it's easy to see you're going to love books better than anything else in this world all your days."

"Nancy was born where they didn't have to guess about a library!" laughed Maizie. "We wasn't — weren't. Now what we want to tell you about is Peter Debbs."

"Your grandfather? What about him?" asked Mrs. Porter, with interest. The rich old man who owned the mills at Chagford Falls was a singular character. He had reluctantly admitted the proofs of these girls being the children of a daughter, lost to him for years, he was lonely, old, immensely wealthy, but uneducated, and he never had shown the slightest interest in these children after he had settled upon them the money which was their due. Mrs. Porter had often wondered whether he would ever put forth a claim upon his granddaughters' pity.

"Well, Mrs. Porter darling, we went over to see Peter Debbs the day before yesterday," said Maizie impressively.

"Really? Did he send for you?" cried Mrs. Porter.

"Not on your life! I mean, No, indeed he didn't," Taizie took up the story. "Doctor Ganson came over from Chagford Falls and told us the old chap had had a slight stroke, and he thought it was pretty horrid for him to be alone there, with only

hired people. He said he knew it wasn't our fault that he lived alone, that we had no chance to get in while he was well, as long as he didn't seem to want us. But he thought now it might be different, and perhaps it was our place to go over. We talked it over and over, and held it up and down, and right side out and wrong side out, and we made up our minds we'd go."

"He couldn't think we wanted anything, because he had settled such a lot on us, and we get all he's got, anyhow, when he dies," Daisy interrupted Taizie.

"And he ought to be smart enough to see he isn't anybody we'd be crazy to get hold of," said Maizie, with the family candour. "He's a sharp old chap, and he ought to see we couldn't especially enjoy an old man like him."

"So we went," Taizie resumed. "His mind isn't harmed the least bit by the stroke, and he's getting over it, but he's feeble, and he can't walk about. Doctor Ganson said he didn't believe he'd ever get up far."

"Yes, but Taizie, what did Peter Debbs do when you appeared?" asked Mrs. Porter. The picture of these four glowing, breezy, red-cheeked, frowsly reddish-haired girls dismounting from their car and

trooping in upon the grumpy old grandfather presented itself to her mind clearly and amusingly.

"When we came in he didn't say anything, Mrs. Porter; he sort of grunted," said Maizie. "We sat down and began to talk. You know nothing ever seems to feaze us; we aren't ever scared, somehow. So we talked real chipper, and told him we were sorry he didn't feel as young as he did when he was our age, and things like that, you know. And after a while tears sort of rolled down his cheeks, and he said: 'I'm all alone.'"

"And that got us!" cried Taizie. "We were awful sorry for him then. And I piped up and said: 'It's your own fault, grandfather. Here we are, four dandy girls, double twins at that, ready to be your granddaughters, if you need such things.' Words to that effect, you know."

"Yes, we told him we would like to look after him," Maizie went on. "I reminded him he couldn't suspect we wanted anything for ourselves, and he said: 'No, you'll have all I've got, whatever you do.'"

"Then we said: 'Come on over to our house and live with us, and we'll see that you have the time of your life, or as near to it as you can come at this end

of life.' And he's coming, sir!" cried Hazie in one burst of words.

"You know we didn't put it exactly as we repeat it," Daisy needlessly explained, "but that was what it summed up. And as sure as you live, the old man is coming to be looked after all the rest of his days! What do you know about that?"

"I know that no one can scold you for sprinkling this dear story with slang like pepper!" cried Mrs. Porter. "Though you certainly have broken your law into small bits this morning! Dear twins, you are such good, dear, generous girls that I can't tell you how much I admire and respect you! I know that was not an easy thing to do which you tell us of with laughter and nonsense — and the forbidden slang! — making light of it. It was a beautiful thing to do, though, a right, fine thing! And I know it is not the pleasantest task to assume the charge of a feeble old man, whom you have never known, and who has shown no interest in you. You dear twins!"

"I should think you were dear and fine!" echoed Nancy.

The Coggs girls looked happy, but painfully embarrassed; they blushed to the roots of their glowing hair.

"Oh, pshaw! It isn't such a much!" cried Taizie. "We'll give him rooms where he won't hear us blowing off steam. And he is our mother's father, though she hadn't seen him for years before she died, and we never knew her at all. Anyhow, we've had great luck already in our short career, and we've got to do the right thing by Peter Debbs. We thought we'd let you know, that's all. It isn't such a much." Taizie ended with her slang, helplessly, as if she could not express herself in good English without making the Coggs generosity seem a more important thing than they wanted it considered.

"Gracious, no! He'll likely be cranky, but we'll just let him crank, and not bother," added Daisy. "Now for the other plum! Maizie's had an offer!"

"Not really!" cried Nancy.

"Straight goods!" cried Daisy. "We thought we'd die."

"Who is it? Did you accept him? Then you would change your name, as you talked of doing this winter!" cried Nancy.

"Did she accept him!" echoed Taizie, as Maizie shook her head, laughing so that she could not speak. "Just wait till you hear! His name is Clarence Fraser; we don't know him from Adam. He lives over in North Chagford. He wrote in the

first place and told Maizie that he had seen her. We all jumped on her and told her we didn't believe he could tell whether he'd seen her or one of us others, but she sticks to it that he knew which he saw. Mean old thing! She won't quarter her old proposal, though everybody knows we can't be told apart till you get onto us! Well, he said he'd seen her and liked her real well — that's the strong way he put it! And he said he hadn't a cent but what he earned, and he hated to think he'd got to pass all his youth grinding to make money. He said he knew she had a lot, and hadn't any father, no one to take care of her, so if she'd marry him he'd take that job, and she could furnish the cash! I don't mean he made it quite so simple, but that's what he really said, in another way."

"What did you reply, Maizie?" laughed Mrs. Porter.

"Didn't reply!" cried Maizie, taking up the tale of this touching romance. "So what did he do but come and serenade me! Honest! Came with an accordion and played and sang — but under Rhoda's window! We girls were nearly dying in the room across the hall, risking our lives with the window up a little way so we shouldn't miss anything. He didn't get a rise, not a wink of life from the house, so at

last he gave it up, and went off with his accordion under his arm — and his voice about there, too, I guess; he sounded terrifically hoarse toward the end of the serenade. Then what did he do but write a postal — true's I'm sitting here! A postal card! He said: 'Dear Miss: Did you get my letter? Why don't you give me a yes or a no?' So I took a postal card, a picture postal card, had the Chagford cemetery drive on it! And I wrote: 'Dear Sir: Letter and postal received. Please find herewith the no you asked for.' That settled him, I guess, for he hasn't bobbed up again."

Mrs. Porter and Nancy joined in the peals of laughter with which the twins heard this inexhaustibly delightful story again.

"Oh, Maizie, how funny, how funny!" cried Nancy. "But any one would know you girls would never be like other people, even in your lovers!"

"I wouldn't call him a lover; he was more a loafer," said Maizie. "What he was looking for was a permanent job where he'd do nothing but draw the salary. But maybe I lost my only chance to shake the name of Coggs, which I don't admire — and shake these three girls! And it's no joke being one of four twins!" She beamed on her sisters as she spoke, and they beamed back upon her.

"I hope nothing will ever take one of you four away from us," said Nancy. "You and Cord keep us lively. And you are such a dear lot!"

Letty Hetty appeared in the doorway. "I never heard such goin's on in my life," she said, nodding cordially to the twins. "I said out there to Bumblebee: 'My land, you'd know who was in there with 'em if you hadn't just cooked cauliflower expressly for Maizie Coggs!' An' it's done; so's everything, an' ready on the table. So come out to luncheon while it's good — if 'tis good! I don't think my biscuits are up to the mark, nor my puddin', either."

"Things you do never are, according to you, Letty Hetty," laughed Nancy, getting up and taking away Maizie's work, then leading her out to the dining-room as her eldest guest.

CHAPTER XIX

DAFFODIL DAY

ANCY stood in the window of her own particular room looking out at the daffodil bed. The daffodils had overspread their boundaries, the original dimensions of their oblong bed, and were coming up in the grass beyond its borders in the prettiest disorder. The young April grass welcomed them among its tender green, and the gold and white and pale yellow of the daffodils in the verdure brought the very essence of spring under Nancy's window. Over beyond was a group of willows, like a yellow mist in the sunshine, and the grave pine by the window gave the needed touch of shadowed green to bring out the riotous youth of colouring further on. Added to this joy of vision was the song of birds, gathering in flocks of pilgrims to say that there was no longer need of southlands for those who lived out of doors. Robins humourously tilted and cocked

their heads, the comedian of birds, uttering their rapid two notes of jubilation; bluebirds warbled as they flew across the lighter blue of sky sloping down to the hills; whole flocks of blackbirds sang in unison down in the trees in the neighbouring hollow, and the pensive peewee dropped repeatedly from its higher to its lower minor note, enjoying the spring no less than its neighbours for being so constituted that it celebrated it thoughtfully.

"Motherdy, I'm going visiting!" announced Nancy, without turning her head, recognizing her mother's step as she came up behind her. "You don't mind if I gather daffodils and shed them on daffodilless people, do you?"

"Indeed I don't!" said Mrs. Porter. "I'm always sorry at this time of year for every one else in the world, because they haven't our daffodil bed. Where, for instance?"

"Shall I shed them?" Nancy rounded her mother's question. "On Louise, in a box mailed to her; she'll get them in the morning. On Grandma Emerson, on Doctor Davidson. Then, this afternoon, on the Slocums, the Allaires, maybe Mrs. McCutcheon. Perhaps no one else to-day. I want to have a golden out-of-doors day. The girls will go with me this morning; father and I are going

out this afternoon. Have you ever noticed, muddersy, that a day like this makes you feel as though the least little thing you do were a tremendous celebration?"

"Yes, Nancy, I have," Mrs. Porter smiled, but nodded full agreement. "There's a feeling in spring as of wonderful significance, expectation. Did you forget the countess?"

"Oh, just for a moment!" cried Nancy, conscience-stricken. "But, of course, it wouldn't have been for long. "I'll take her the best of the daffodils. I wish she weren't going; I do so much wish she weren't going!"

"We all wish that, dear," said Mrs. Porter regretfully. "We shall miss her, not only miss her sweet self, but miss the romance that her pretty speech and foreign ways and looks brought into our Chagford days."

"She'll come back," declared Nancy, too April-happy to take a dismal view of anything. "I'll go out and gather my daffodils, then, if I may have them. And do you think there is a lady that would lend me her long, brown, willow basket to carry them in?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it; you'll find it in the hall closet," her mother consented, and Nancy flew off

to get the basket and the gardening scissors, not yet used that year. She cut the daffodils with long stems; juicy and crisp, they cut; it was refreshing as something on the palate merely to hear the cut, to smell the sweet spring-like odour of the leaning blossom as she gathered it.

"I wouldn't live in a large city, not for all Aunt Mary Lawrence's great, magnificent house and everything in it!" said Nancy rapturously to Bumblebee and Fred, the former of whom had placed herself among the daffodils, which she resembled with her yellow parted face and yellow front leg and white breast, while the other rolled and grunted blissfully at Nancy's side, rubbing the middle of his back all down the green grass, like his mistress revelling in the sense of spring.

"Well, Fredlings, you may go, too, if you like," said Nancy when, her basket full of gold and white and green fragrance, she arose and started after her hat and coat. "Missy Bumblybee, you must stay at home to look after Flip and Funny; that's what mothers are for, unless they're strong-minded suffragettes, and you're far too nervous ever to be strong-minded, my beauty Bumblebee."

Nancy ran down the street, taking a skip at every few steps, and humming Mendelssohn's "Spring

Song " as she ran, quite as though the daffodils had been doing a sum in subtraction with her sixteen years. Her mother's pretty brown basket looked like a mint, piled with its daffodils, and Fred bounded on before her, back and forth on his way, his long ears flying backward and his plume of a tail waving approval of April and of this expedition.

" Mimi, will you come? " Nancy called from the gate of the Hunt house, pausing there to get her chum.

" Yes. Where are you going? You look like a gold mine," Mimi called back. Then she took her hat and joined Nancy without waiting for an answer to her question.

" I'm going to Doctor Davidson's first," said Nancy. " I'll stop at Grandma Emerson's and at the inn on my way back. I've gathered daffodils for people; I'm going to shower daffodils on part of Chagford. You may have some to-morrow. I'm going to call for Doris — shall we? "

" Of course," agreed Mimi. " Nancy, isn't it awful that she's going away to-morrow? Won't everything feel empty? "

" Not when the birds and flowers are just come," said Nancy truthfully, " though nobody will miss that lovely Cousin Bianca more than I shall. But,

I'll tell you, Mimi! It has been rather a sad winter; that is it was a winter when you had to try all the time not to let it be sad — and that never is quite a success, you know. But now my brave doctor-daddy is getting used to his loss and is happier, because he looks forward to Rick as his successor, and practises in the meantime, and is busy with St. Mark's. It is spring, and, somehow, I can't feel sad. I come right up like a cork after a few sober moments!"

"No harm in that," observed Mimi. "And I guess your father wouldn't be where he is if you hadn't been like his own eyes to him — almost."

"Almost! That's different from like his own eyes," Nancy nodded. "But it's been the dearest thing in the world to know I was a little like them, Mimi. You don't know what a comfort it is to pay back a wee bit. It's been my opportunity, and I love it."

"You took it, if it was your opportunity," said Mimi. "Everybody in Chagford says that Nancy Porter is just the sort of big girl that you'd expect the doctor's little girl to be. They say it's lovely to see you driving your father as he used to drive you, with old Tonic."

Nancy laughed, her low, happy laugh, so much like her father's. "I wonder what they think any-

body would do when trouble comes to their very dearest and best? Nonsense, Mimi; it's not that. But it's like a nice, kind Jamaica ginger, that warms and never burns, to feel one can do something for my doctor."

"Well," admitted Mimi. "I know I'd like to do anything in the world for him, and I'm not his child. Goodness! Look at the suffrage parade!"

Nancy looked and saw "four Coggs, one Cordie, one Amabel, one Doris," so Mimi enumerated them, coming toward them.

"Where are you going?" cried the seven girls to the two girls, just as the two girls asked the same question of the seven girls.

"To Doctor Davidson's," replied Nancy. "Nowhere at all; just wandering," said Amabel at the same moment.

"'Turn again, Dick Whittington, lord mayor of London,'" quoted Nancy. "Come with us. You can wait outside while I go in to speak to Doctor Davidson; I won't be any time."

"All right; anywhere is everywhere to us on such a day as this," said Maizie Coggs. And the seven turned and escorted the two on their way.

Nancy ran on ahead and left her friends waiting while she darted into Doctor Davidson's house.

She found the doctor alone. She thought afterward that she never found him otherwise. There was not that happy family life in this house which one felt in the Porter house, almost on its threshold; when Doctor Porter was alone he came to hunt up his wife or Nancy, as glad to find them as if they had been long apart.

"I've brought you some of the spring, doctor," said Nancy, taking a great handful of the dewy daffodils from her basket.

"Oh, my dear little Nancy, indeed I thank you!" said Doctor Davidson. He took the fragrant, fresh blossoms in both hands and his voice trembled. "They were part of the happy days of my life, Nancy. My mother had a bed of daffodils and every spring she sent me with them all around to the dreariest homes in our town. She was a good woman, my mother! I never took daffodils when I was a boy to a home as dreary as you have brought these to to-day."

"Oh, Doctor Davidson, dear!" said Nancy, with quick sympathy, wondering, frightened.

"It is nothing to talk of, Nancy; I do not want my trouble known. But your father's child is his comfort and reliance; my son is — gone wrong, Nancy!" the doctor said.

"I'm so sorry," said Nancy. She put out her hand. "Maybe he will go right again!" she said. "The daffodils come back every spring. Maybe he will come back to you better. Let me get some water out of your closet here and put these daffodils in this bowl. Then when you see them you will think that he is coming back, because spring and daffodils come back after they both seem dead."

Nancy busily put the flowers in the bowl as she talked, and set them, moist and fair, on the doctor's table.

"Dear little maid, you are a comfort! Porter is not to be pitied, though he is blind!" declared the doctor, and Nancy gladly saw that he looked cheered. "I could bear the sorrow better were there any one to share it, my dear."

Nancy was quite old enough to know that this meant that the doctor's wife and he were not lightening their grief by carrying it together, and to understand that it was harder because the one who should have been a comforter failed in her part.

"I share it," she said gently. "I love you very much since you helped me as you did, and since you gave the hospital dear father's name. I wish I could really help, but I truly share your trouble, a little anyway, because I am so fond of you. Do you sup-

pose the daffodils will tell you that, too, when you look at them?"

"Dear little girl, you have brightened the room with your affectionate sympathy, and your spring blossoms!" said Doctor Davidson. "When I look at the daffodils I will say to myself: Davidson, old fellow, you have a little share in the other doctor's child, and there's hope in the world, because every year there's a springtime in it!"

"That's nice!" approved Nancy. "I think I'll kiss you good-bye because you have a share in me, and your own boy is — not here." She ended her sentence delicately, and the doctor smiled at her. Nancy kissed his cheek and Doctor Davidson kissed hers, as cool and fresh and springlike as the flowers she had brought him.

"This was an inspired visit, dear Nancy," said the doctor, and followed her to the door to say good-bye, where he laughed at the sight of Nancy's six comrades drawn up in a seated phalanx on the green of the opposite bank waiting for her.

Nancy walked soberly down to Grandma Emerson's, engrossed in the thoughts which her glimpse of unknown troubles had aroused in her.

All the girls swarmed into Grandma Emerson's little white house; it was the refuge of them all.

"Daffy-down-dilly has come to town!" announced Nancy, dropping her flowers into the little old lady's lap.

"Land sakes, Nancy, I do love 'em!" cried Grandma Emerson. "I'd rather have them than real gold, have more use for 'em! Dean is sewing out at North Chagford to-day, so I'm trusted to stay at home alone in my own house and look after it! Dean spoils me. Girls, just get down that green Japanese bowl and set another bowl inside it for the daffodils; the green one gets crackled if you wet it — please, my dears."

The girls hastened to do as they were bidden, all eager to serve this beloved little old lady, a real little old lady in a world in which old ladies are going out of fashion.

"Now for cookies!" said Grandma Emerson, but the girls protested. She never lost her belief that big and little children were chronically hungry.

"We've got to hurry on, because we're to stop at the inn and it is getting late," said Nancy.

"Well, I'm a thousand times obliged to you, Nancy, for the flowers; there's something about daffodils and chrysanthemums, each in their way, that no other flower has; I guess it's because they come first and last. Good-bye, then; my love to

your mothers, girls, — or Mimi and Nancy. And to Doris' aunt. Cordie, tell Lydia I'm going up there as soon as I can get some one to take me; it's a longer walk than it used to be. Distances get pulled out like elastic as you get older! You dear, big, breezy Coggs girls, you haven't any one at home but Miss Drummond to take a message to, but she's welcome to a hearty one. I love to have you children drop in on me. I think I get happier every year, living as I do! It's nicer than you know, children, to be happy when you're old, because then you haven't one thing to look forward to but greater happiness — that can't end!"

"What a dear, dear little creature she is!" said Mimi fervently as they went away.

The Countess Valtino met them in the hall of the inn. "I'm glad that you came, all of you. Oh, Nanciata, the lovely spring flowers! Oh, thank you, my dear! I wish that I were not going to-morrow. I have sent for some souvenirs of Florence for you all, my American girls!" She turned to a table and opened a bag that she carried. "I was on my way to find you, one after the other, and give you these."

She handed each girl in turn a box which, on opening, they found to contain a piece of Florentine jewelry, no two alike. These gifts Rick's cousin

followed up with a photograph for each of her home beside the Arno, the Villa Blanca, where, she told them, she hoped one day to entertain them all.

"And Nancy! Nancy is surely coming, Nancy and Rick. I have something here for my boy who is too loyal to be my boy!" she added. "Indeed I love Rick more, not less, for fidelity to his friends, for his devotion to the noble doctor, to that dearest of mothers — and to this little girl. So this is what I have sent for and received for Rick." Gleefully she opened a violin case and disclosed a violin wonderfully inlaid, but otherwise like all violins to the girls.

"Ancient! My dears, it is three hundred years old! And of a tone that is superb! So I am assured — There is Rick, passing! Call him, call him!" cried the Cousin Bianca.

"Rick, hi there, Rick! Rick! Come in here, quick!" shrieked Cord, to whom the task of hailing any one always fell when she was among the girls by reason of her possessing a voice that could penetrate almost anything and reach almost anywhere, shrill and energetic to the last degree.

Rick heard and came. "My Riccardo, my boy cousin, I had sent to Florence for little remembrances for my American young dear ones. For

you is this," said the countess, and laid in Rick's arms the violin in its case.

"My, an old one!" cried Rick, recognizing this at once. He lifted it lovingly.

"It was once played by Paganini; it has seen three centuries, I am told," said his cousin. "It is strung; will you try it?"

Rick rapidly tuned it, trying the strings till they were in harmony. Then he drew his bow across them and played Händel's "Largo." Full, rich, wonderful was the tone of the old instrument, like a 'cello in depth, yet a violin in its penetrating sweetness.

"Oh, I never heard its like, Cousin Bianca!" cried Rick in ecstasy. "I can't thank you, you know!"

Mrs. Halleck, the landlady, came in. "Fiddle a little since you're here," she said.

Rick played; the new-old instrument was a revelation, more beautiful with every stroke. Rick played at last Tosti's "Good-bye," and dropped his bow at the last note.

"Oh, don't go back, Cousin Bianca!" he cried.

"No, don't go back!" cried the girls.

"You know we wouldn't have minded your going if you hadn't come, but since you did, we'll miss you

like ginger," said Taizie Coggs, speaking for her family.

There was no possibility of being sentimental after this speech. The countess laughed with the girls and held out her hands to them all.

"You'll all be at the station to see me off to-morrow?" she begged. "And I'm going only to return, and to have you all come to me, remember that."

That afternoon the doctor and Nancy went out with Tonic; Rick was to ride with them on Sanitas, the afternoon was so perfect, for this fair spring day did not relapse into chill as it advanced, as April days so often do.

Mrs. Porter stood at the gate, bareheaded, watching them start. The sunlight fell on her soft brown hair, yet untinged with gray. Nancy, turning and catching the sweetness of her noble face, was moved to jump out of the shabby old buggy, from which no one yet had divorced her father, and to run back to kiss her mother.

"You dear thing!" said Nancy fervently.

"Why, Nancy?" asked Mrs. Porter, amused, but pleased.

"I don't know; it just struck me all over again. But you are, you know! I wouldn't exchange you for any mother in the world, not for all the others!"

said Nancy, running back to the buggy, and jumping in again.

"Don't you forget my sugar!" called Letty Hetty from the side of the house. She had come around, ostensibly to remind Nancy of the sugar, in reality to see them off; Letty Hetty shared the family liking for having the last moment together.

"I won't forget! Tonic would remind me if it were cut sugar," laughed Nancy.

"Ready, Rick? Don't let Sanitas lead Tonic into running away. Oh, daddy dearest, let's tuck Fred into the bottom of the buggy, as long as we are not making professional calls; he looks so wistful!"

The doctor waved his hand toward the house, Nancy leaned back and waved hers to her mother and Letty Hetty, Rick took off his cap in a gay salute, and the buggy and rider started.

Up the lake road they went, Nancy with her lap full of daffodils for the Misses Allaire, the Coggs girls, crippled Lydia Slocum and Mercy. The birds sang as they had sung all day, the fresh fragrance of Nancy's daffodils mingled with the damp sweetness of the spring, of newly turned earth, sap and young leafage.

"Nancy, my precious, the spring has come for me, too. In the winter I thought it might not come.

You have been my comfort, daughter. I do not feel blind now," said the doctor, after driving in contented silence for a while.

"Then I am a happy girl, father of mine!" said Nancy. "It has seemed, sometimes, as if it came just as an opportunity for me."

"You have surely made the most of it," said the doctor. He put out his hand and touched her cheek. "And that dear boy ahead of us" — Rick had passed them on Sanitas — "is a comfort, too. I feel altogether differently since I know that he will take my place. And, Nancy, if ever I have to leave you, Rick will take care of you."

"Yes, daddy dearest, Rick will always take care of me," said Nancy simply. "But you will not leave me! We are going to drive and drive these dear old roads, we two together, till we are dear old people ourselves — aren't we?"

"God willing, my Nancy; I hope so, I think so — till one of us is old, at least," said the doctor. He put an arm around Nancy and drew her close to him.

"My little daughter, the light of my eyes!" he murmured.

"My big father, my dearest, biggest, wisest, best-est father!" returned Nancy.

So they drove on together toward a sunset that

the doctor could not see, yet which bathed him in its warmth and glory, up the spring-green wooded road, along the lake, Tonic, Nancy and her doctor-father, the happiest, most peaceful pair in all Chagford, as they had always been, because they were together.

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